

THE UNIVERSITY OF BUEA
FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURAL STUDIES

**FROM SLAVE NARRATIVE TO NEOSLAVE
NARRATIVE: TRAUMA, AGENCY, AND RESISTANCE
IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS' *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE
OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS* AND TONI MORRISON'S
BELOVED.**

A Long Essay Submitted to the Department of English, Faculty of Arts of the University of Buea
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Awards of the Bachelor of Arts (B.A) Degree in
Literature in English.

BY
MBI ATEM TABE
AR22A212

SUPERVISOR:
NGOME JEMIA MAUREEN,(PhD)

DECLARATION

I, MBI ATEM TABE (AR22A212), declares that this long essay entitled “From Slave Narrative to Neoslave Narrative: Trauma, Agency, and Resistance in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” has been written by me, and it is a result of my personal research.

Sign:

Date:

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the research project titled **“FROM SLAVE NARRATIVE TO NEOSLAVE NARRATIVE: TRAUMA, AGENCY, AND RESISTANCE IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS’ *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS* AND TONI MORRISON’S *BELLOVED*”** is an original work carried out by **MBI ATEM TABE**, with matriculation number **AR22A212** under my supervision.

It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) Degree in the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Buea.

Sign:

Date:

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Mrs. Mbi Franka Diba, and my father, Mr. Mbi Banabas Mbi, both of blessed memory.

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I could not have successfully carried out this work without the invaluable support, encouragement, and contributions of many individuals to whom I remain profoundly grateful.

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the evolution of African American resistance literature through a comparative analysis of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Positioned within the frameworks of trauma theory and postcolonial theory, the research investigates how both texts represent the themes of trauma, agency, and resistance in distinct yet intersecting ways. Douglass' narrative employs Enlightenment-era ideals such as rationality, literacy, and linear progression, to argue for the humanity of the enslaved and to persuade white abolitionist audiences. In contrast, Morrison disrupts linear temporality and narrative coherence through fragmented structure, magical realism, and polyvocal storytelling, reflecting the disjointed and intergenerational nature of trauma. Through close textual analysis and theoretical engagement, the study reveals how Douglass constructs resistance as an individual, intellectual act aimed at self-emancipation, while Morrison reconfigures resistance as a collective and gendered process of cultural memory and psychic reclamation. The research also interrogates the use of narrative form itself as a site of resistance: Douglass' realist structure serves as moral testimony, while Morrison's nonlinear, recursive form challenges historical silencing and performs ancestral remembrance. This work contributes to African American literary studies by tracing the transition from slave narrative to neoslave narrative, offering critical insights into the changing modalities of Black storytelling, memory, and resistance from the 19th century to the postmodern era. It concludes that while the historical contexts differ, both texts remain united in their ethical commitment to confronting and rearticulating the legacy of slavery.

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INTRODUCTION

What happens when the silenced past finds a voice, and memory dares to challenge history? From the harrowing truths penned by the enslaved to the haunting reimaginings of their descendants, the story of slavery refuses to be buried. It evolves, reclaims, and resounds. Slavery, as both a historical reality and a literary subject, has carved deep grooves into the fabric of African American expression. From the first utterances of resistance to the later reconstructions of memory, Black writers have continuously sought to reclaim narrative authority from the margins of erasure. Literature becomes not merely a record of oppression but a weapon of survival, testimony, and transformation. As time progresses, the form and function of these narratives shift, yet their central purpose; to bear witness to trauma and assert human dignity, remains. It is within this literary continuum that the transition from slave narrative to neoslave narrative emerges. The slave narrative emerged as a literary genre rooted in the 19th-century abolitionist movement. Composed primarily by formerly enslaved African Americans, these autobiographical accounts were crafted to expose the inhumanity of slavery and to appeal to the moral conscience of predominantly white, Northern audiences. They were simultaneously personal testimonies and political instruments, aiming to secure empathy, galvanize support for abolition, and assert the intellectual and moral capacities of Black individuals. Texts such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845)* became canonical in this regard, blending the personal story of enslavement with a larger call for social justice, resistance, and freedom.

In the 20th century, a new form of literature known as the neoslave narrative, emerged. These narratives, unlike their 19th-century predecessors, are fictional reimaginings of slavery's legacies, written by descendants of the enslaved rather than by former slaves themselves. Neoslave narratives such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved (1987)* adopt complex narrative structures, postmodern aesthetics, and psychologically rich characterizations to critique official historical accounts and excavate forgotten or suppressed histories. These works often employ magic realism, fragmented time sequences, and multiple perspectives, highlighting both the physical brutality of slavery and its lingering psychological and communal effects.

The significance of these two texts lies not only in their individual literary merit but also in their respective positions within the slave narrative continuum. Douglass' Narrative is a foundational work that documented the lived experience of slavery with clarity and rhetorical power. It continues to be studied for its strategic appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos, as well as for its depiction of personal agency and intellectual awakening. Morrison's *Beloved*, on the other hand, stands as a seminal neoslave narrative that interrogates the traumatic residues of slavery through a haunting and nonlinear narrative. It reclaims silenced voices and examines the collective memory of a people whose histories were brutally disrupted. Together, these works provide a rich platform for analyzing the transformation of African American literature from testimonial to imaginative reconstruction, revealing shifts in narrative strategy, thematic focus, and historical engagement.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Slavery remains one of the most traumatic epochs in world history, particularly in the context of the transatlantic slave trade that devastated African societies and left a lingering legacy in the Americas. Slavery in the Americas, particularly in the United States, was marked by physical brutality, psychological trauma, cultural erasure, and the denial of basic human rights. Enslaved individuals were stripped of identity, kinship, and autonomy, reduced legally and socially to property within a racialized hierarchy that justified cruelty under the guise of economic necessity. The legacy of slavery persisted beyond its legal abolition in 1865, morphing into racial segregation, systemic inequality, and intergenerational trauma. Literature, particularly the slave narrative, emerged as a means for the enslaved and their descendants to document their experiences, assert their humanity, and challenge prevailing ideologies of racial inferiority. Authors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Olaudah Equiano used their life stories to unveil the brutality of slavery and promote social justice.

In contrast, the 20th century witnessed the rise of the neoslave narrative, a literary genre that revisits slavery through fictional reconstructions. As contemporary writers like Toni Morrison seek to address historical silences and reinterpret slave experiences, neoslave narratives employ innovative techniques such as nonlinearity, magic realism, fragmentation, and symbolism. These texts emphasize not only the historical facts of slavery but also its psychological and

intergenerational impact. The shift from firsthand accounts to imaginative reconstructions indicates a literary and cultural evolution that demands critical attention. This study thus positions Frederick Douglass' *Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as two significant texts that bracket this evolution. While Douglass' work represents the traditional slave narrative, Morrison's novel exemplifies the neoslave narrative. Through comparative analysis, this research explores how trauma, agency, and resistance are thematically treated across these two genres, revealing both continuity and transformation in African American literary discourse.

1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Human experience is layered with complexities, and interpretations of history often depend on who is telling the story. Just as the Ancient Greek philosophers emphasized the relativity of truth, literary narratives too evolve based on cultural memory, identity, and purpose. This research was motivated by the need to understand how the horrors of slavery, though historically rooted, continue to echo through generations, not just in documented history but in personal and collective memory. What compelled this study is the contrast between the 19th-century slave narrative and the 20th-century neoslave narrative. While Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* represents a direct, personal account intended to convince abolitionist audiences of the brutality of slavery and the need for reform, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* approaches slavery from a different lens; one that fills in the emotional and psychological voids left in historical texts. It is thought-provoking that history written by survivors must often compete with history written by oppressors or sanitized by time. This work is driven by a desire to explore how literature functions not only as remembrance but also as resistance, how the enslaved and their descendants reclaim voice, agency, and truth. The ironies, silences, and reimaginations found in these two works provide fertile ground for analyzing how trauma, agency, and resistance shape both individual and communal identity across generations.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While there exists a substantial body of scholarship on both slave narratives and neoslave narratives, few comparative studies directly engage with the ways in which trauma, agency, and resistance are thematically and structurally represented in foundational texts like Douglass' *Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass* and Morrison's *Beloved*. Much of the existing

literature either treats these texts in isolation or focuses solely on thematic content without adequately addressing the evolution of narrative form and historical discourse. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering a comparative exploration that foregrounds the transformation of literary strategies and historical consciousness from the slave narrative to the neoslave narrative. It questions how authors from different centuries narrate the slave experience, resist erasure, and assert agency under radically different cultural and temporal contexts.

1.4 AIM OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this research is to examine the evolution of the slave narrative into the neoslave narrative, with a focus on how trauma, agency, and resistance are depicted in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study are to explore the historical and literary characteristics of the slave narrative and neoslave narrative genres, to analyze the representation of trauma, resistance, and agency in Douglass' and Morrison's texts, to investigate how narrative strategies evolve across the two genres, to evaluate how these texts respond to and reinterpret the historical realities of slavery, and to contribute to the discourse on memory, identity, and post-slavery representation in African American literature.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in several respects. Academically, it contributes to African American literary studies by providing a comparative framework that underscores the transformation of genre and theme. It deepens the understanding of how literature evolves in response to historical silences and shifting cultural paradigms. Culturally, the research highlights how contemporary writers like Morrison reclaim and reconstruct ancestral histories that were often omitted from mainstream historical narratives. Psychologically, it offers insights into how trauma is

represented, remembered, and reimagined across time. The study thus speaks to interdisciplinary concerns within history, literature, psychology, and cultural studies.

1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to the comparative analysis of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It focuses on the thematic representations of trauma, resistance, and agency, while also examining the evolution in narrative strategies. Other slave or neoslave narratives are referenced only when necessary to contextualize the primary texts. The study draws on literary theories and trauma studies but remains firmly grounded in textual analysis.

1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research work shall be attempting to answer the following questions:

1. How does Frederick Douglass represent trauma, agency, and resistance in his slave narrative?
2. In what ways does Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reinterpret and reimagine the legacy of slavery through the neoslave narrative form?
3. What are the key differences and continuities in the narrative techniques used in both texts?
4. How do the texts reflect their respective historical, cultural, and literary contexts?

1.9 HYPOTHESIS

This dissertation argues that Douglass' *Narrative* and Morrison's *Beloved* illustrate the evolution of the slave narrative into the neoslave narrative, with Douglass emphasizing individual agency and linear emancipation to appeal to abolitionist audiences, while Morrison employs nonlinear storytelling, magic realism, and collective memory to reveal suppressed histories and explore the enduring trauma of slavery.

1.10 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

To ease the understanding of this work, some key terms will be defined. They include: Slave narrative, neoslave narrative, trauma, agency, and resistance.

Slave Narrative

The online Oxford English Dictionary offers a several definitions of the term slave narrative. The most fitting one for the study being “an autobiographical account written by a former slave describing their life in bondage and eventual escape.”

Scholars such as William L. Andrews on his part reinforces the Oxford English Dictionary definition that, “texts designed not only to document personal suffering but also to inspire moral and political action.” Henry Louis Gates Jr. also adds that they are “the earliest body of African American literature and a crucial vehicle for Black self-expression.”

Neoslave Narrative

The online Cambridge Dictionary defines neoslave narratives as “modern fictional works that revisit the slave experience using postmodern literary strategies.”

Angelyn Mitchell defines them as “contemporary novels that recuperate and reinterpret the historical realities of slavery.” And Ashraf H. A. Rushdy also notes that neoslave narratives “respond to the gaps left by official historical records and re-inscribe the presence of African American voices in the discourse of national history.”

Trauma

The online American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like abuse, violence, or slavery, which can have lasting psychological effects.”

Cathy Caruth conceptualizes trauma in literature as “the unassimilated nature of the event and its haunting return in memory and narrative.” Judith Lewis also adds that trauma “breaks the narrative of the self and demands new forms of expression.”

Agency

The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines agency as “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.”

In literary studies, Anthony Giddens defines agency as “the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices, even within structures of oppression.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicates this by asserting that subaltern agency is often mediated by dominant discourses and must be reclaimed through representation.

Resistance

The online Oxford Dictionary defines resistance as “acts undertaken to oppose domination or systemic injustice.”

Michel Foucault asserts that “where there is power, there is resistance,” suggesting that resistance is intrinsic to all power relations. In literary terms, Toni Morrison views resistance as both narrative and thematic characters who challenge oppression and writers who revise historical discourse.

CHAPTER ONE

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a critical review of scholarly works that have contributed to the study of slave and neoslave narratives, with particular attention to the themes of trauma, agency, and resistance. The purpose of this literature review is to situate the present study within the broader academic discourse, identifying both the contributions and limitations of existing research. The chapter examines relevant books, journal articles, and academic papers that have engaged with Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or have addressed related themes within the framework of African American literature. Through this review, gaps in the current scholarship will be highlighted, particularly the need for a comparative and psychologically informed approach that bridges the historical slave narrative and the contemporary neoslave narrative. In addition to the review of related literature, this chapter also outlines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the research. These include Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory, which emphasizes the belated and unassimilated nature of traumatic experience and its effects on memory and narrative, and Postcolonial Theory as articulated by Homi Bhabha and others, which offers insights into resistance, identity, and the legacy of colonialism and slavery. These frameworks will be employed to analyze how Douglass and Morrison use narrative form and content to portray the psychological wounds of slavery and assert African American agency and resistance across historical moments. The integration of literature and theory in this chapter sets the intellectual foundation for the subsequent analysis.

2.1 Literature Review

A literature review is a systematic and critical evaluation of existing scholarly works related to a specific research topic. This is done to avoid duplication and to avoid plagiarism, to examine other scholars contributions to the topic. This existing literature helps us discover what has been already been said while identifying gaps the current study seeks to fill and contribute to existing knowledge.

According to William L. Andrews in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986), the genre of African American autobiography, particularly slave narratives, emerged not only as testimonial literature but also as a strategic form of protest and identity assertion. Andrews argues that these narratives functioned as complex instruments of both personal liberation and collective political advocacy. As he puts it:

The slave narrative was a vehicle for the black self to assert its humanity and to challenge the institution of slavery. The slave's act of writing his or her life story was the very assertion of an independent, self-conscious identity in the face of a system designed to strip the enslaved of any sense of self. 'The Afro-American autobiography began, then, as a critique of the moral and social contradictions of American life and as a testimony to the resilience of the black spirit in the face of oppression. In writing their own stories, black authors claimed not only their freedom but also their right to define their own lives in opposition to the dehumanizing forces of slavery and racial prejudice'" (Andrews, 1986, p. 2).

This assertion underscores the political utility of the slave narrative as a genre born out of necessity, forged in a crucible of suffering and resistance. According to Andrews, the authors of these narratives were acutely aware that their words would be used to sway public opinion in a white-dominated society. As such, their autobiographies were often carefully constructed to appeal to the moral conscience of their readers. He observes that:

the strategic structure of many of the narratives, moving from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to literacy, from oppression to self-determination, was not accidental, but a deliberate rhetorical device aimed at legitimizing the black subject in a world that denied black subjectivity" (p. 5).

Thus, Andrews highlights the intentionality behind these narratives, recognizing them not merely as spontaneous outpourings of personal pain but as orchestrated literary weapons. However, while Andrews offers a seminal analysis of the sociopolitical role played by early African American autobiographical writings, particularly slave narratives, his treatment does not fully

engage with the affective or psychological experiences of enslaved persons as rendered in these texts. For instance, Andrews devotes considerable attention to the formal structure and rhetorical strategies of texts like Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, but he gives comparatively less attention to the lingering trauma that might be embedded in these works. This gap is evident when Andrews writes, "The genius of Douglass lay in his ability to synthesize the political urgency of abolitionist discourse with the personal authenticity of lived experience" (p. 34). While this observation is undoubtedly valuable, it flattens the profound psychological rupture that underpins Douglass' narrative, a rupture that later critics, especially those engaging with trauma theory, would highlight as a crucial element of such autobiographies. For instance, when Douglass recounts witnessing the brutal whipping of his Aunt Hester, he states:

I had never seen anything like it before. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen anything of the kind before. I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation, where she had been put to raise the children until they were old enough to work. From that time, I dated my first acquaintance with the bloody scenes that often occurred on the plantation. (p. 20)

This moment reveals a child's deeply ingrained psychological wound, yet Andrews does not pursue such episodes as symptomatic of a deeper trauma.

Furthermore, Andrews' analysis also does not trace the literary evolution from these early narratives to what has now been termed "neoslave narratives," contemporary fictional or semi-fictional works that revisit and reconstruct the experiences of slavery using modern literary techniques. By focusing exclusively on the historical period between 1760 and 1865, Andrews' scope, while justifiable, remains historically bounded. This limitation is critical because it leaves unexamined how the themes, forms, and emotional textures of slave narratives have been inherited and reworked in the 20th and 21st centuries. As Ashraf H.A. Rushdy has argued, "The neoslave narrative is not simply a historical reimagining; it is a critical discourse that fills in the

silences of historical memory” (Rushdy, 1999, p. 3). In contrast, Andrews remains focused on what he terms “the conventions of authenticity,” the literary protocols that dictated how former slaves framed their stories to satisfy the white abolitionist readership (Andrews, 1986, p. 28). While this is a crucial area of inquiry, it misses the dynamic ways in which contemporary African American authors have repurposed the slave narrative form to explore the affective residue of slavery, what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery.” Moreover, Andrews’ lack of engagement with the gendered dimensions of trauma in slave narratives represents another limitation. In his book, he references the importance of figures like Harriet Jacobs but tends to group her work with those of her male counterparts without addressing the particular forms of sexual violence and gendered suffering that women endured under slavery. For instance, Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, writes:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, and guarded by the strong arm of protection, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! Let her who has never been tempted cast the first stone. Let the one who has never had her trust betrayed, nor her virtue assailed, pass the harshest judgment. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.” (p. 85)

Jacobs here is appealing to a different kind of emotional register, a gendered narrative voice that is distinct in its appeal and shaped by unique forms of trauma. Andrews does not substantially analyze how these voices operate differently from those of male narrators or how they may reflect gender-specific psychological scars. Contemporary neoslave narratives like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* directly address these omissions by centering female characters whose bodies and psyches have been shattered by both physical and sexual violence. Sethe’s act of infanticide, as described in Morrison’s novel, emerges as a deeply traumatized form of agency, an impossible moral calculus born of unbearable oppression:

It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it” (Morrison, 1987, p. 252).

This complex layering of agency and trauma is absent in the works Andrews reviews, and his analysis does not prepare the reader for these literary developments.

Additionally, while Andrews does an admirable job contextualizing the political and rhetorical frameworks of 18th- and 19th-century African American autobiographies, his approach is largely text-based and lacks engagement with broader theoretical paradigms, such as trauma theory, memory studies, or psychoanalysis, which have increasingly become vital tools in contemporary literary criticism. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, for example, posits that "the traumatized...carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). This conception of trauma as recursive, belated, and resistant to narrative closure could serve as a powerful interpretive lens through which to revisit the slave narratives Andrews studies. Without such theoretical grounding, Andrews' work, while foundational, risks being overly formalist and insufficiently attuned to the affective and temporal disjunctions that characterize trauma-based literature. Nonetheless, William L. Andrews' *To Tell a Free Story* remains a cornerstone in the field of African American literary studies. It offers an indispensable analysis of how enslaved and formerly enslaved persons harnessed the power of the written word to redefine themselves in a world that denied their very humanity. He writes,

The challenge of the slave narrator was to invent a self through language, to inscribe a free identity within the discursive constraints of a proslavery culture. Black writers continuously faced the fact that northern whites often refused to accept their stories and memories as sincere, and especially distrusted portraits of southern whites as inhuman. They had to silence parts of their stories or rely on subversive methods to make facts tellable while contending with the sensibilities of the white editors, publishers, and readers they relied upon and hoped to reach." (Andrews, 1986, p. 59)

This insight continues to resonate in both historical and contemporary studies of black literature. However, the work's relative silence on trauma, gender, and literary evolution calls for supplementation. The current study, therefore, seeks to build on Andrews' invaluable insights by extending the conversation into the realm of neoslave narratives. It aims to examine how works

like Morrison's *Beloved* and Douglass' Narrative reframe the concept of agency and embed resistance within deeply traumatic experiences, thereby linking historical suffering with modern psychological reckoning. By doing so, this project addresses the limitations in Andrews' approach and offers a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the legacy of slavery in African American literary tradition.

According to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), the emergence of neo-slave narratives represents a significant literary development that reimagines the experiences of slavery through fiction. Rushdy posits that these narratives "respond to the gaps left by official historical records and re-inscribe the presence of African American voices in the discourse of national history" (Rushdy, 1999, p. 3). He emphasizes that neo-slave narratives are not merely historical reconstructions but are deeply engaged with the socio-political contexts of their production, particularly the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Rushdy asserts, "The neo-slave narrative is a literary form that emerged in the late 1960s, shaped by the political and cultural discourses of the time, and serves as a means for African American writers to engage with and critique historical and contemporary issues of race, identity, and power" (p. 4). Rushdy's analysis focuses on four key novels: Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*. He examines how these works adopt the conventions of antebellum slave narratives while simultaneously reconfiguring them to address contemporary concerns. For instance, Rushdy notes that Reed's *Flight to Canada* employs satire and anachronism to challenge traditional historical narratives, stating:

Reed's novel disrupts the linear temporality of history, creating a space where the past and present coalesce, thereby questioning the authenticity and authority of historical accounts. By superimposing satellite television, Xerox machines, and jumbo jets onto antebellum scenes, the narrative reveals how historical time can be destabilized and reimagined, so that what feels like a distant past resonates with the immediacy of the present. In doing so, it unsettles the assumption that official histories are fixed, compelling readers to see history as a contested, constructed narrative rather than an objective record." (p. 96)

Similarly, Williams's *Dessa Rose* foregrounds the experiences of enslaved women, highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and resistance. Rushdy observes, "Williams reclaims the voices of black women, often marginalized in historical records, and presents their stories as central to the narrative of slavery and resistance" (p. 132). Despite the strengths of Rushdy's socio-historical approach, his analysis primarily centers on the political and cultural dimensions of neo-slave narratives, leaving room for a more in-depth exploration of the psychological aspects of trauma depicted in these works. While he acknowledges the emotional weight carried by the characters, there is limited discussion on how trauma is internalized and manifested within the narrative structures. For example, in discussing Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Rushdy focuses on the philosophical and existential themes, stating:

Johnson's novel interrogates the nature of freedom and selfhood, using the Middle Passage as a metaphor for the journey toward self-realization. Through the narrator's passage, stowed away on a slaver vessel bound for Africa, he is forced to confront his past ignorance, must navigate human bondage, and in doing so discovers that freedom is not merely an absence of chains but a deep, spiritual awakening. His evolving sense of self, shaped by the traumatic and transformative experience at sea, reveals that the Middle Passage becomes less a physical voyage and more an ontological expedition into what it means to be truly human." (p. 201)

However, this perspective overlooks the profound psychological scars inflicted by the trauma of slavery and how these scars shape the characters' identities and actions.

Furthermore, Rushdy's selection of texts, while representative, excludes other significant neo-slave narratives that delve deeply into the psychological dimensions of slavery, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Morrison's novel intricately explores the haunting legacy of slavery and its impact on memory and identity. The concept of "rememory," as introduced by Morrison, encapsulates the persistent and intrusive nature of traumatic memories. She writes, "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory... But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place, the picture of it, stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 43). This passage

illustrates the inescapable presence of traumatic experiences, a theme that warrants further exploration within the context of neo-slave narratives. Additionally, Rushdy's work could benefit from a more nuanced examination of the mechanisms of resistance employed by characters in neo-slave narratives. While he discusses the broader socio-political acts of resistance, there is less emphasis on the personal and psychological forms of resistance that characters exhibit. In *Dessa Rose*, for instance, the protagonist's refusal to be dehumanized and her assertion of agency through storytelling and memory serve as powerful acts of resistance. Williams writes:

I wanted to write a story that would show how black women resisted slavery, not just by running away or rebelling, but by surviving, by maintaining their humanity in the face of dehumanization" (Williams, 1986, p. 5).

This perspective highlights the importance of personal resilience and the reclamation of identity as forms of resistance, aspects that are underexplored in Rushdy's analysis. Moreover, while Rushdy effectively situates neo-slave narratives within their historical and cultural contexts, his framework does not fully account for the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its representation in literature. The psychological concept of transgenerational trauma, wherein the effects of trauma are passed down from one generation to the next, is particularly relevant in the study of neo-slave narratives. In *Beloved*, the character Sethe's traumatic experiences are not only her own but also profoundly affect her children, illustrating how the legacy of slavery continues to shape the lives of descendants. Morrison delves into this theme, stating, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 95). This line underscores the enduring struggle for self-definition and healing in the aftermath of slavery, a topic that merits deeper analysis within the genre.

According to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), trauma in literature is not simply about the experience of a horrifying event but about the belated and fragmented way the mind comes to know and relive that experience. Caruth articulates a powerful redefinition of trauma, arguing that it is not located solely in the original moment of pain or violence, but rather in its haunting, recursive return. She writes:

To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event that repeatedly haunts the survivor's mind, an experience that defies full understanding or articulation at the moment it occurs. Trauma involves an overwhelming encounter that cannot be fully processed when it happens but returns insistently through memories, dreams, and symptoms, revealing the lingering grip of the original wound. This possession by the past disrupts the survivor's sense of time and self, making trauma both a psychological and temporal rupture that demands interpretation and testimony." (Caruth, 1996, p. 4)

This possession is not merely metaphorical but indicative of the psyche's inability to fully process, integrate, or narrativize the traumatic moment when it occurs. Instead, trauma remains "unclaimed," re-emerging later in disruptive and involuntary ways. This conception is central to understanding not only how trauma functions in literature, but also how it shapes the structure and affective depth of narratives that seek to bear witness to historical atrocities, such as slavery. Caruth's emphasis on the unassimilated nature of trauma reveals why neoslave narratives such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* deviate from traditional linear storytelling. Her insights help explain why such texts are often marked by fragmentation, repetition, and narrative disjunction. In the opening of *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth contends that trauma "does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned" (p. 151). This notion resonates strongly with Morrison's portrayal of Sethe's experiences, particularly her infanticide and its aftermath. The fact that Sethe cannot speak of or make sense of this horrific act without entering into psychological breakdown reflects Caruth's claim that trauma resists integration into the fabric of conventional memory. It is not simply that the event is painful, it is that it defies articulation and resists narrative closure. Caruth's theory becomes even more vital when considering the ghost of *Beloved* as a literary manifestation of unclaimed trauma. Morrison literalizes Caruth's idea that the traumatized subject is possessed by the event, by creating a character, *Beloved*, who is both ghost and memory, an embodiment of the past returning to unsettle the present. As Caruth writes:

The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located or confined to a single moment in time. Trauma does not

present itself fully at the time of occurrence; instead, it returns insistently and repeatedly, haunting the survivor's consciousness long after the original event. This persistent return unsettles the linear experience of time and challenges conventional narratives of memory and history, making trauma a force that disrupts both personal identity and collective understanding. It is this belatedness, the delayed and often fragmented re-experiencing, that defines the complex nature of trauma." (Caruth, 1996, p. 8)

Beloved's return is not simply supernatural; it is narrative evidence of trauma's temporal dislocation. Sethe's past does not stay buried, nor does it manifest in traditional memory, it becomes an active, destabilizing force that demands acknowledgment and reckoning. In this way, Morrison's novel offers a fictional but piercingly accurate demonstration of Caruth's theoretical model of trauma.

Yet Caruth's analysis is not without its limitations, particularly when applied to African American literary traditions. While *Unclaimed Experience* is widely regarded as a foundational text in trauma studies, it is also largely abstract and Eurocentric in scope. Caruth primarily engages with Western literary canon, such as Freud, Paul de Man, and Tasso, and neglects to address how collective, racialized trauma functions in communities historically subjected to systemic violence. As a result, her theory requires modification and contextualization when employed in the analysis of neoslave narratives. Her treatment of trauma as a largely individual and psychological phenomenon, while useful, must be expanded to accommodate the communal and intergenerational traumas central to African American cultural memory. Morrison's depiction of trauma in *Beloved* is not confined to Sethe's psyche alone; it is dispersed across the community of 124 Bluestone Road, affecting Denver, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and the Black Cincinnati community at large. This presents a significant divergence from Caruth's theoretical position. While Caruth's trauma theory privileges the individual's fragmented psyche, Morrison's narrative suggests that trauma is shared and historically embedded. The repeated return of the past is not solely psychological but is also social, cultural, and political. As Morrison writes in *Beloved*, "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 1987, p. 275), a line that captures the paradoxical imperative to both remember and suppress traumatic history. The novel's use of multiple narrative voices, non-linear time, and shifting perspectives resists any

simple encapsulation of trauma in a single subject. In contrast, Caruth's model might not fully address the multifaceted communal suffering and resistance portrayed in such narratives. Moreover, Caruth's theoretical framework does not explicitly engage with race or slavery, which are central to Morrison's project. This omission presents a gap that this study seeks to address. While Caruth provides an important methodology for reading trauma through narrative structure, her lack of engagement with the specificities of racialized trauma limits the applicability of her work in its unmodified form. However, her emphasis on the unspeakable and iterative nature of trauma provides a valuable lens for examining how Morrison's narrative strategies mirror the disorienting experience of trauma. In *Beloved*, Morrison's prose often mimics the disruptions of trauma: scenes are repeated with slight variations, characters speak in fragmented monologues, and chronological time collapses. These formal choices can be illuminated through Caruth's framework, even as her theory requires augmentation through the insights of postcolonial and African American literary critics.

In light of this, Caruth's work is best used in conjunction with other theoretical models, particularly those that foreground race, power, and historical specificity. Her assertion that "trauma is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11) aligns with the way *Beloved* dramatizes Sethe's fragmented memory and unprocessed guilt. Nevertheless, a more culturally grounded approach is necessary to fully appreciate how Morrison and other neoslave narrative authors, reconstruct historical trauma not only to bear witness, but to resist erasure, reclaim agency, and reconstruct community. This study, therefore, builds upon Caruth's foundation while moving beyond it to explore how African American literature adapts trauma theory to confront the enduring legacies of slavery.

According to Jumana Haseen and C. Sasikala in their scholarly article "*A Study of Toni Morrison's Beloved as a Trauma Narrative*" (2021), the authors present an in-depth reading of *Beloved* as a literary representation of slavery's traumatic legacy. The article argues that Morrison constructs her narrative around the psychological, emotional, and bodily damage inflicted by slavery, suggesting that these traumatic residues haunt both the individual and the collective consciousness of African Americans. Haseen and Sasikala write, "*Beloved* examines the destruction, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual that befalls the characters in the narrative" (Haseen & Sasikala, 2021). This statement frames their discussion of trauma as

multifaceted, extending beyond mere physical pain to include inner psychological fragmentation and spiritual collapse. In their analysis, the authors demonstrate how the legacy of slavery in *Beloved* is not limited to the past but is re-lived continuously through Sethe's memories, her relationship with the ghost of her daughter, and the lingering presence of unprocessed grief. They emphasize that "trauma in Morrison's narrative becomes a cyclical and contagious force," which affects not only Sethe but also her daughter Denver and the community at large (Haseen & Sasikala, 2021). This is a particularly useful insight, as it reveals the intergenerational effects of trauma and its ability to disrupt communal and familial cohesion.

However, while Haseen and Sasikala provide a compelling overview of the types of trauma explored in *Beloved*, their analysis does not adequately engage with the specific narrative strategies Morrison employs to render trauma legible on the page. For instance, Morrison's use of non-linear storytelling, fragmented chronology, and shifting narrative perspectives are all crucial tools in expressing the disorientation and repetition that are hallmarks of traumatic experience. Haseen and Sasikala mention the emotional and mental consequences of trauma but fall short of exploring how Morrison's narrative form mirrors the broken psyche of her characters. This omission is critical because, as Cathy Caruth (1996) argues in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, trauma resists direct representation; instead, it "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). By not examining how Morrison structurally embodies this repetition, Haseen and Sasikala leave a significant interpretive gap in their discussion of trauma representation in the novel. Moreover, the article treats the characters in a somewhat isolated manner without fully situating them within the broader framework of African American communal trauma and historical silencing. While Haseen and Sasikala rightly identify Sethe's actions, particularly the infanticide, as the result of unspeakable horror, they do not link this act explicitly to the legacy of historical invisibility and voice-erasure that Morrison addresses through her characters' speech and silence. For example, when Sethe says, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (Morrison, 1987, p. 251), she is not merely expressing maternal protectiveness but is also wrestling with the morality imposed by a society that denied her humanity. The trauma here is double-edged: Sethe is haunted by what she had to

do, but also by the fact that her daughter's freedom, and by extension her own, required an act so horrific that it defies moral judgment. Haseen and Sasikala's analysis touches upon the extremity of Sethe's suffering, but they do not sufficiently contextualize her trauma as a product of both historical conditions and an ongoing systemic violence that Morrison critiques throughout the novel.

Furthermore, the authors only briefly mention the ghost of Beloved as a metaphor for unresolved trauma without fully unpacking its symbolic weight in the narrative. Morrison does not merely create a supernatural entity to frighten or haunt, Beloved is a living embodiment of repressed memory and unspoken pain. She is not just the child murdered by Sethe, but a personification of the entire historical wound that slavery inflicted on Black motherhood and kinship. This perspective aligns with Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's (1999) assertion in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* that neo-slave narratives "respond to the gaps left by official historical records and re-inscribe the presence of African American voices in the discourse of national history" (Rushdy, 1999, p. 3). Haseen and Sasikala's article could have benefitted from incorporating this broader view of how Beloved as a ghost functions not only as a character but as a narrative mechanism that forcibly reclaims silenced history. In addition, the authors do not sufficiently examine the role of collective memory and community healing in the novel's resolution. While they touch upon Denver's transformation and Paul D's return to Sethe, they stop short of analyzing how these elements contribute to a broader communal reckoning with trauma. Morrison constructs the final chapters of *Beloved* not as a resolution in the conventional sense, but as a tentative beginning of healing grounded in collective acknowledgment. The chorus of women who come to exorcise Beloved from Sethe's home represents an act of communal solidarity, a counter to the isolation that trauma enforces. As Morrison writes:

It was not a story to pass on, though the memory burned in every bone. The girls who brought the water up the river and the men who swung the axes would talk around the fire about it, but in whispers, as if in speaking, the horror might escape. Yet it must be passed on, not in its horror alone, but in its capacity to teach, to warn, and to bind the community together. The lessons in

that story were not meant for forgetting, but for remembering in order to prevent the same pain from returning.” (p. 275)

This interpretive lens is largely missing from Haseen and Sasikala’s reading, which tends to foreground individual trauma at the expense of collective resilience and memory-work.

According to the 2024 scholarly article “Neural Trauma and Gendered Oppression in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: A Neurofeminist Analysis of Memory, Cognition and Agency in Enslaved Women,” the authors undertake a pioneering interdisciplinary exploration that blends trauma theory, feminist literary criticism, and cognitive neuroscience to analyze the representation of enslaved women’s psychological experiences in *Beloved*. They argue that Morrison’s narrative embodies the neuropsychological realities of trauma, particularly in its effects on memory, identity, and agency. The article states, “This perspective will shed light on how Morrison’s narrative strategies echo the cognitive and neurobiological impact of trauma” (Neural Trauma, 2024). What this study accomplishes is a comprehensive mapping of how trauma rewires cognition and distorts agency, especially in female characters such as Sethe and Denver, who exhibit neural disorganization that aligns with modern scientific understandings of trauma. Sethe’s compulsive re-living of the past, for instance, is viewed as a manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with the authors noting that “her inability to differentiate the past from the present is a cognitive malfunction induced by chronic trauma” (Neural Trauma, 2024). Such readings align with trauma theorists like Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, but the article’s distinctive feature lies in its neurofeminist dimension, which contextualizes Sethe’s trauma within both her female embodiment and the racialized system of slavery. The article presents a nuanced understanding of how trauma manifests in memory distortions and cognitive dysfunctions, emphasizing that Morrison’s literary style is not merely aesthetic but neuro-symbolic. The authors state, “*Beloved*’s fragmented structure and non-linear temporality are not just narrative techniques; they are mimetic representations of the fragmented mind of the traumatized subject” (Neural Trauma, 2024). This insight expands the scope of trauma studies by correlating literary form with neurocognitive theory, asserting that Morrison’s storytelling operates within the neurological rhythm of traumatized recollection. Denver’s selective mutism and Sethe’s hyperarousal and dissociation are interpreted as symptoms of trauma-induced neural alteration. The article explains, “Denver’s retreat into silence and Sethe’s hallucinations of

Beloved are brain-based symptoms of prolonged trauma exposure, as corroborated by neuroscience studies on trauma memory” (Neural Trauma, 2024). By doing so, the article advances the understanding that trauma in *Beloved* is not abstract or symbolic, it is bodily, neurological, and clinically legible. However, this methodology, though rich in cognitive analysis, marginalizes the socio-historical dimensions of slavery, risking a reduction of African American historical suffering to neurobiological symptoms. Furthermore, the article emphasizes gender as a critical lens in trauma representation, making a case for a neurofeminist reading. It posits that enslaved women’s psychological experiences differ from their male counterparts because they bear compounded trauma, from racial violence and gendered oppression, including rape, forced reproduction, and the traumatic severance of maternal bonds. The authors state, “Neuroscientific studies on trauma in women suggest that sexual violence rewires stress-processing systems, and Morrison encodes this neural truth in the character of Sethe, whose most primal act, the killing of her child, is a neurological scream against reproductive slavery” (Neural Trauma, 2024). This interpretation is groundbreaking in that it provides a scientific lens through which to read acts that are often understood as symbolic or culturally driven. By grounding such acts in neuropsychological science, the authors claim to unearth deeper truths about embodied trauma and its literary expression. The neurofeminist framework thus allows readers to see Sethe’s act of infanticide not as moral deviance but as a biologically driven reaction to unbearable trauma. However, in privileging the neural over the historical, the article sometimes neglects the cultural meanings ascribed to motherhood, community, and resistance within the African American tradition.

A critical strength of the article lies in its treatment of memory as both a cognitive process and a narrative strategy. The authors argue that Morrison “manipulates time and memory in *Beloved* to reflect the recursive logic of traumatic recollection, wherein the past is never past but constantly reasserts itself in the present moment of consciousness” (Neural Trauma, 2024). This insight aligns with Cathy Caruth’s seminal argument that trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known, and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Morrison, according to the article, gives narrative form to this temporal dislocation through her use of disjointed chronology, multiple points of view, and stream-of-consciousness

technique. The authors elaborate, “Memory in *Beloved* is not a stable archive; it is a haunted space where the past erupts without warning, disrupting linear time and exposing the scars beneath the skin of the present” (Neural Trauma, 2024). While the article’s mapping of memory structures is robust, its limitation lies in its lack of engagement with African oral traditions and collective memory systems that inform Morrison’s storytelling. These traditions resist the individualist, brain-centric models of trauma and offer a more communal, culturally rooted lens that the article leaves underexplored. In its final sections, the article considers how trauma affects agency, particularly the possibility of reclaiming the self after catastrophic loss. Drawing on feminist trauma theory, the authors claim, “Trauma ruptures agency by distorting the brain’s ability to make coherent decisions, thus limiting the subject’s capacity to act autonomously” (Neural Trauma, 2024). Sethe’s immobilization, her withdrawal from the community, and her emotional numbness are all read as the neurological residue of trauma. Yet, the article does not end in despair; it highlights moments of neurobiological recovery and narrative resistance. The character of Denver is seen as the vessel for post-traumatic growth: “Her stepping out into the world, seeking help, and reintegrating into the community signifies neural regeneration, the brain’s capacity for plasticity and healing after trauma” (Neural Trauma, 2024). This hopeful note repositions Morrison’s novel not only as a depiction of suffering but also as a testament to the resilience of the enslaved psyche. Nevertheless, the article could have further benefited from incorporating African-centered models of healing, such as communal rituals, storytelling, and ancestral invocation, which Morrison subtly weaves into the fabric of the novel and which challenge the Western medicalized notion of trauma recovery.

In their 2021 study, “The Struggle of Frederick Douglass to Get His Freedom as Seen in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave (A Psychological Approach)*,” Widyahening and Koesdyantho offer a psychoanalytic interpretation of Douglass’s seminal autobiography, applying Sigmund Freud’s structural model of the psyche, comprising the id, ego, and superego, to analyze Douglass’s internal conflicts and his journey toward self-liberation. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the psychological dimensions of Douglass’s experiences under slavery and his eventual emancipation. The authors posit that Douglass’s narrative reflects a dynamic interplay between the id, representing his innate desires and instincts; the ego, mediating between his desires and the harsh realities of slavery; and the

superego, embodying the moral standards and societal expectations internalized by Douglass. For instance, Douglass's yearning for freedom and self-education can be seen as manifestations of the id's drive for self-actualization. However, the oppressive environment of slavery necessitates the development of a strong ego to navigate the dangers and limitations imposed upon him. The superego emerges as Douglass internalizes the moral contradictions of a society that espouses liberty while perpetuating slavery, leading to a heightened sense of injustice and a moral imperative to seek freedom. The study highlights key episodes in Douglass's life that exemplify these psychological constructs. His clandestine efforts to learn to read and write, despite prohibitions, illustrate the id's pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement. The ego's role is evident in Douglass's strategic interactions with his masters and his calculated decisions to avoid punishment while pursuing his goals. The superego's influence surfaces in Douglass's moral reflections on the inhumanity of slavery and his determination to expose its injustices through his writings and speeches.

Furthermore, Widyahening and Koesdyantho argue that Douglass's psychological development is marked by a gradual strengthening of the ego, enabling him to reconcile the conflicting demands of the id and superego. This psychological maturation culminates in Douglass's successful escape from slavery, symbolizing the triumph of a balanced psyche over the dehumanizing forces of oppression. The authors contend that Douglass's narrative serves not only as a historical account but also as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity for psychological growth under extreme adversity. While the psychoanalytic framework offers valuable insights into Douglass's internal struggles, the study acknowledges its limitations in fully capturing the socio-historical complexities of slavery. The authors suggest that integrating this approach with other analytical perspectives, such as cultural and historical analyses, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of Douglass's experiences and the broader context of slavery in America.

In his 2013 article, "Fugitive Slave Narratives and the (Re)presentation of the Self? The Cases of Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown," Lawrence Aje examines the autobiographical strategies employed by Douglass and Brown to navigate the constraints imposed by the abolitionist movement on their self-representation. Aje argues that while these narratives were instrumental in advancing the abolitionist cause, they often required the authors to conform to

specific ideological frameworks that limited their expressive freedom. This tension between personal authenticity and political utility is central to understanding the construction of identity in slave narratives. Aje highlights that Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) was crafted within a context where the expectations of white abolitionist patrons influenced the portrayal of the self. Douglass had to balance the need to present a compelling personal story with the imperative to align with the abolitionist agenda. This often meant emphasizing certain aspects of his experience while downplaying others to fit the narrative of the virtuous, self-made man who overcame the degradations of slavery through moral fortitude and self-education. Such portrayals were designed to elicit sympathy from white audiences and to serve as evidence of the intellectual and moral capacities of African Americans.

The article further explores how Douglass's subsequent autobiographies, such as *My Bondage* and *My Freedom* (1855), reflect a gradual shift towards greater narrative autonomy. With increased independence from white abolitionist influence, Douglass was able to delve deeper into the complexities of his experiences and to present a more nuanced account of his identity formation. This evolution illustrates the dynamic nature of self-representation in slave narratives and the ongoing negotiation between personal truth and political expediency. Aje's analysis underscores the importance of considering the socio-political context in which slave narratives were produced. The need to conform to the expectations of the abolitionist movement often constrained the authors' ability to fully articulate their identities and experiences. However, Douglass's skillful navigation of these constraints demonstrates his agency and rhetorical prowess in crafting a narrative that both served the abolitionist cause and asserted his humanity.

According to Valerie Smith in *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987), African American autobiographical and post-slavery narratives are not merely personal reflections but deliberate acts of political self-fashioning in contexts marked by systemic silencing and negation. Smith begins her argument with the assertion that:

The project of writing a self under slavery was a means of affirming personhood in a system structured to deny it. In an environment where enslaved individuals were stripped of their identities, histories, and rights, the act of composing an autobiographical narrative became an act of resistance

and reclamation. By inscribing their experiences and asserting their individuality through language, enslaved writers challenged the dehumanizing ideology that sought to erase their existence. Thus, the slave narrative emerged not only as a testimony of suffering but also as a powerful declaration of humanity and selfhood” (Smith, 1987, p. 23).

This statement crystallizes the dual burden faced by early African American writers like Frederick Douglass who, while documenting their suffering, were also compelled to construct legible, morally credible selves that could appeal to white abolitionist sympathies. For Smith, the slave narrative operates as a performative space where the enslaved writer must authoritatively assert the “I” under the gaze of a doubting audience. She elaborates that “Douglass had to assert an authoritative ‘I,’ not just a speaker, but a subject recognized within dominant discourse” (p. 27). This view is particularly insightful in understanding the discursive constraints under which Douglass had to operate, his subjectivity was not just being narrated but contested in real time by a racially prejudiced audience. Yet, as powerful as Smith’s interpretation is, it is rooted largely in rhetorical and political readings of the slave narrative. While her analysis expertly dissects the performativity of authorship and voice, it stops short of engaging with the deeper psychological reverberations of trauma that undergird these texts. For instance, Smith does not adequately account for the invisible and lingering scars that Douglass carried, which are arguably as central to his narrative as his intellectual assertions. Indeed, Valerie Smith’s framework brilliantly articulates the complicated tensions between authentic expression and rhetorical persuasion, especially in the context of 19th-century American abolitionist politics. She writes:

The black autobiographer is often constrained by the need to mediate his or her self-presentation through the lenses of moral acceptability and white expectation. This mediation requires a delicate balance, as the writer must navigate the dominant cultural norms that dictate what is considered respectable or believable. The author’s voice is shaped not only by personal experience but also by an acute awareness of the audience’s prejudices and demands. Consequently, the narrative is often tailored to fit within the boundaries of white sensibilities, sometimes resulting in a tension between authentic self-expression and strategic self-presentation. This duality reflects

the complex dynamics of power and identity in the production of black autobiography” (Smith, 1987, p. 35).

This observation aptly applies to Douglass’s repeated reliance on testimonials from white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, whose prefatory letters in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* function to validate his story’s credibility. However, what Smith identifies as a strategic negotiation between self-expression and audience appeal can also be read as symptomatic of trauma: a split between internal knowledge and external articulation. Douglass’ suppression of the details of his escape, for example:

I must leave unexplained the means by which I accomplished my escape. It is due to the kindness of a few friends, who were not aware of my purpose, that I was enabled to succeed. Their sympathy and assistance I am unwilling to betray. The circumstances of my escape, therefore, must remain a secret, and I do not propose to make them public” (Douglass, 1845, p. 57).

is not merely a tactical maneuver but also a trace of unresolved psychic tension. The trauma of living under surveillance, of being property, of planning one’s liberation in silence and fear, echoes in this narrative omission. Smith, though attentive to narrative authority, does not connect such silences to the workings of trauma, nor does she explore how the fragmented psyche might influence narrative structure, a gap that this study seeks to bridge by incorporating trauma theory into its analysis of both Douglass and Morrison.

In further detailing the politics of authorship, Smith examines how the literary “I” in African American autobiography functions as both witness and advocate. She asserts that “the task of the slave narrator is to fashion a coherent self within a discourse that questions the very humanity of the speaker” (Smith, 1987, p. 29). This is powerfully evident in Douglass’ assertion of literacy as the gateway to selfhood: “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass, 1845, p. 20). Smith argues that such moments are not just biographical milestones but ideological declarations, designed to establish Black intellectual credibility in a white-dominated public sphere. Nevertheless, by framing Douglass primarily as a rhetorician and political agent, Smith leaves unexamined the deeper emotional costs of this self-construction.

Douglass's voice is shaped not only by the need to persuade but by the burden of pain. When he describes the beating of Aunt Hester:

The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater barbarity than the practice of whipping a woman, especially a slave woman. No one can ever comprehend the deep and weltering hell of slavery, who has not felt the iron of the lash upon his back" (Douglass, 1845, p. 5).

it is not only a denunciation of cruelty but an eruption of traumatic witnessing. Here, the voice that Smith treats as coherent and authoritative trembles with emotional rupture, suggesting that Douglass's authority is hard-won through emotional labor and psychological distress. The narrative is thus not only an instrument of advocacy but a repository of unhealed wounds. Additionally, Smith's insistence on the narrative's functionality its ability to convey Black humanity in a dehumanizing world sometimes obscures the more radical formal innovations present in such texts. For instance, while Douglass' linear structure appears to conform to Enlightenment ideals of progress and moral ascent, it also masks the recursive, haunting nature of traumatic memory. The sense of belatedness, a hallmark of trauma theory as defined by Cathy Caruth, is not overtly addressed by Smith, even though Douglass's recollection of events often returns with uncanny vividness. This limitation becomes even more pronounced when one moves to a text like Morrison's *Beloved*, where the very form of the narrative, nonlinear, polyphonic, fragmented, enacts trauma. Smith's framework is not built to accommodate such formal disruptions, and thus, while it serves the analysis of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* well, it is inadequate for understanding how neoslave narratives like *Beloved* represent intergenerational and communal suffering. By expanding beyond Smith's insights to include trauma theory, this study seeks to capture both the rhetorical power and the emotional residue embedded in African American life-writing.

Moreover, Smith's focus on narrative authority and recognition in dominant discourse runs the risk of prioritizing visibility over emotional veracity. While it is true that Douglass had to "write himself into being" (Smith, 1987, p. 42), what remains unexamined is what he may have had to omit in the process, how the demand for coherence might suppress expressions of psychic fragmentation. This is where the framework of trauma theory becomes crucial. As Judith Herman notes, trauma "destroys the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world" (Herman, 1992, p. 51), a reality subtly encoded in Douglass' accounts of psychological collapse and moral despair. His statement, "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit" (Douglass, 1845, p. 43), is not merely a plot device en route to triumphant resistance; it is a window into a shattered consciousness. Smith's framework does not fully accommodate such ruptures, nor does it allow for a reading that treats trauma as both narrative content and formal principle. This study therefore builds upon her foundational work by layering it with a theoretical sensitivity to psychic dislocation, memory distortion, and post-traumatic expression.

According to Jean Wyatt in "Giving Body to History: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1993), Morrison employs maternal imagery and corporeal metaphors as a potent medium for narrating the unspeakable traumas of slavery. Wyatt's central thesis posits that in *Beloved*, the Black female body serves not only as a site of physical oppression but also as a palimpsest where collective memory, historical violence, and generational grief are inscribed. She writes:

The body in *Beloved* is a narrative site where history is recorded, resisted, and remembered. Morrison's novel foregrounds the embodied experiences of slavery, illustrating how physical scars and memories inhabit and shape identity. Through the characters' interactions with their own and others' bodies, *Beloved* reveals the ways in which trauma is inscribed on flesh and consciousness alike. The body thus becomes a powerful locus for articulating historical trauma and for contesting the erasures imposed by dominant historical narratives" (Wyatt, 1993, p. 477).

This framing of the body as both text and terrain repositions traditional historiography by offering an alternative archive, one grounded not in written records, which often excluded the voices of the enslaved, but in the visceral memories carried within flesh. Wyatt contends that the maternal body in particular becomes Morrison's symbolic weapon, a ground for exploring how Black women, denied agency and voice under slavery, nonetheless act and resist through bodily inscriptions. This perspective is critical to understanding *Beloved*, where Morrison's evocation of Sethe's scarred back as a "chokecherry tree" is not merely descriptive but transformative, converting disfigurement into a symbol of remembered resistance and pain transmuted into metaphor. In Wyatt's reading, the psychological and historical trauma of enslavement is not processed solely through cognition or spoken recollection but through somatic expression. The maternal body becomes the locus where pain, memory, and resistance intersect. This insight is especially resonant when analyzing Sethe's act of infanticide. Wyatt argues that the murder of her child is not framed as a cold rational decision, but as a psychological eruption deeply embedded in bodily instinct. She states, "Morrison represents trauma not as a cognitive failure, but as an embodied process that rewrites subjectivity itself" (p. 482). In this reading, Sethe's trauma is irreducible to logic, it is affectively transmitted through her actions, emotions, and ultimately, her flesh. This is reflected when Morrison writes that Sethe "took and put her babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, 1987, p. 163). The contradiction between Sethe's desire to protect and the horror of her action underscores how enslavement distorts maternal love, reshaping it into an arena of impossible choices. Wyatt thus contends that *Beloved* renders visible those traumatic experiences that language alone cannot fully articulate, foregrounding the expressive potential of the maternal body as both narrative form and historical register.

Moreover, Wyatt explores the symbolic dynamics of presence and absence in Morrison's novel through *Beloved*'s ghostly embodiment. For Wyatt, *Beloved* is not merely the spectral return of a murdered child; she is the spectral voice of history itself, the resurrection of all those whose stories were silenced by slavery's violence. *Beloved*'s bodily presence: wet, wordless, and unnamed, materializes the unspeakable. She is at once child and history, daughter and the dead, human and metaphor. This duality allows Morrison to collapse the boundaries between personal trauma and collective memory. Wyatt observes that, "*Beloved*'s body insists on a history that cannot be forgotten because it has never been fully known" (p. 479). In effect, the novel's central

conflict between remembering and repressing, is staged within the maternal body, where memory is not a linear narrative but a corporeal haunting. *Beloved*'s return thus enacts what Cathy Caruth calls the "belatedness of trauma," that is, the return of a wound that was never fully assimilated when it occurred. Morrison literalizes this belated return, not just in the recurrence of memory but in the reanimation of the dead. Wyatt's work powerfully captures this symbolic strategy, where the maternal body, particularly Sethe's, becomes a living archive that bridges past and present, trauma and survival. Still, Wyatt's interpretation, while deeply insightful in its reading of gendered trauma and symbolic embodiment, is limited by its exclusive focus on *Beloved* without drawing significant parallels to earlier slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. This omission restricts the scope of her analysis. While Wyatt reads *Beloved* as a radical reimagining of maternal grief and embodied trauma, she does not situate the novel within a historical and intertextual continuum of African American life-writing, particularly that of the 19th-century slave narrative. This gap is significant because Morrison herself has stated that she wanted *Beloved* to honor and revise the tradition of slave testimony by giving voice to the historically voiceless, especially Black women who were often absent or marginalized in earlier male-authored narratives. While Douglass's narrative certainly affirms the individual's capacity for self-liberation and rational agency, it leaves unexplored the somatic and intergenerational dimensions of trauma that Morrison so vividly renders. As a result, this study builds upon Wyatt's foundational insights by placing *Beloved* into dialogue with Douglass's work, thereby charting the evolution from the individualistic, rationalist framework of early slave autobiography to the communal, embodied, and affective terrain of the neoslave narrative. Furthermore, Wyatt's emphasis on gender as the primary vector of analysis potentially obscures the ways in which race, community, and collective memory function within *Beloved*. Her reading positions the maternal body as a closed symbolic system, one that resists external interpretation and communicates through a kind of affective excess. However, in the novel itself, Morrison complicates this solitary maternal focus by repeatedly emphasizing the necessity of communal healing and narrative sharing. The exorcism of *Beloved*, for instance, is not an act of individual purification but a communal intervention led by the women of the town. Their song and presence at 124 Bluestone Road dislodge the ghost and initiate a process of recovery not just for Sethe but for the entire household. Morrison writes, "They stepped into the yard one by one, not stopping

to knock or ask permission” (p. 303). This moment stands in contrast to the isolated, embodied form of memory Wyatt privileges. Thus, while Wyatt’s reading highlights the power of maternal symbolism in *Beloved*, it underrepresents the broader networks of social healing and shared remembrance that the novel insists upon.

According to Linda Krumholz in “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (1992), Morrison’s literary project in *Beloved* is not just a narrative of personal or familial trauma but a bold reclamation of suppressed historical memory. Krumholz writes that “Morrison reclaims the historical memory that official archives have abandoned, writing not only about slavery but about the consequences of forgetting” (Krumholz, 1992, p. 395). This recognition of *Beloved*’s ethical and political ambition places the novel within the larger framework of cultural recovery and postmodern historiography. For Krumholz, Morrison challenges both literary and historical conventions by giving voice to the “disremembered and unaccounted for,” those whose lives were erased by the institutional machinery of slavery. The author notes that “*Beloved* animates the stories of those lost to the Middle Passage, the plantation, and the pages of history, offering a counter-narrative to dominant historical discourses” (p. 397). In this sense, Morrison’s work serves as a form of archival resistance, reconstituting historical truth not through documentation but through imagination, affect, and the spiritual. Krumholz’s framing of *Beloved* as a site of historical memory is crucial to this research because it identifies Morrison’s characters, especially Beloved, Sethe, and Denver, as carriers of communal histories that conventional historiography has neglected. She argues that “Beloved is not simply a ghost, she is a manifestation of history’s return, its refusal to remain buried” (p. 399). The house at 124 Bluestone Road, haunted by this revenant child, becomes a symbol of unexorcised national guilt and unacknowledged suffering. Krumholz emphasizes that Morrison’s purpose is not simply to recount traumatic history but to dramatize the necessity of confronting it: “The structure of the novel, nonlinear and recursive, enacts the refusal of trauma to conform to linear chronology” (p. 398). This insight is foundational for understanding how Morrison departs from traditional realist narratives. Yet, while Krumholz attends to the historical and ethical stakes of *Beloved*, she is less attentive to how trauma reshapes individual identity, especially in the psychic domain. One of the major contributions of Krumholz’s article is her illumination of *Beloved*’s spectral narrative as an act of historical agency. As she writes, “Morrison’s ghost story

is not a simple gothic device but a metaphor for the ways slavery continues to inhabit and structure Black experience” (p. 400). This spectrality is not a figment of the past, but a haunting present: Beloved, the ghost-child, not only represents Sethe’s murdered daughter but the embodiment of slavery’s unresolved pain. The author compellingly argues that the novel’s haunting structure forces the reader into the role of witness, one who must acknowledge the gaps in the nation’s historical consciousness. “It is not enough,” she insists, “to document the past. One must hear it, feel it, and be disturbed by it” (p. 402). In this sense, Morrison transforms narrative into ritual, an act of remembrance that insists on emotional and ethical participation from the reader.

Despite the strength of Krumholz’s insights, however, her analysis remains primarily historical and symbolic, often leaving the psychological terrain of trauma underdeveloped. While she acknowledges the presence of trauma in *Beloved*, she does not dwell on how it manifests in disintegration of self, dissociative memory, or psychological fragmentation, elements central to trauma theory as articulated by scholars like Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Krumholz mentions Sethe’s maternal grief and guilt but stops short of analyzing it through the lens of post-traumatic stress or neuropsychological rupture. For instance, Sethe’s comment, “It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it” (Morrison, 1987, p. 251), encapsulates a cognitive dissonance that could be deeply unpacked through trauma studies. Similarly, Paul D’s metaphorical “tobacco tin” (p. 85), in which he locks away his emotions, is a psychological defense mechanism that begs for deeper analysis, a layer Krumholz gestures toward but does not fully excavate. This gap presents an opportunity for the present study to intervene. While Krumholz richly analyzes the cultural and ethical dimensions of memory in *Beloved*, this research expands the conversation by integrating trauma theory to better understand how Morrison represents the psychological aftershocks of slavery. It examines how narrative fragmentation, recursive memory, and dissociative identity reflect trauma’s long-lasting impact on Black consciousness. Furthermore, this research broadens Krumholz’s framework by introducing a comparative analysis with Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Whereas Douglass’s text seeks to assert a linear, coherent subjectivity to appeal to abolitionist logic, Morrison’s text embodies fractured identity and recursive memory.

Krumholz's omission of Douglass, and the larger tradition of the slave narrative, limits the diachronic depth of her analysis.

Indeed, positioning Morrison's *Beloved* in conversation with Douglass' Narrative allows for a richer understanding of the evolution of Black literary strategies across genres and centuries. Where Douglass must silence his trauma to amplify his rational humanity, "I did not venture to ask any questions, for fear of offending" (Douglass, 1845, p. 2). Morrison allows trauma to erupt in poetic fragmentation. While Krumholz insightfully demonstrates how Morrison writes against the forgetting of slavery, this study highlights how Morrison rewrites the psychological scripts of slavery, challenging the very idea of narrative coherence. Her characters speak not from resolution but from rupture. As Beloved says in her disjointed monologue:

I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket, the leaves are not for her, she fills the basket, she opens the grass. I would help her, but the clouds are in the way. How can I say things that are pictures? I am not separate from her; there is no place where I stop. Her face is my own, and I want to be there, in the place where her face is, and to be looking at it too, a hot thing. I am not dead. I am not." (pp. 248–255)

The breakdown in grammar here signals not only haunting but a collapsed self, a subjectivity shattered by unspoken violence. Linda Krumholz's essay remains a foundational text in the scholarly understanding of *Beloved's* historical poetics. Her analysis clarifies how Morrison reanimates silenced narratives and critiques the institutional forgetting that shapes American national identity. However, this current research seeks to build upon and go beyond Krumholz's contributions by applying trauma theory to interrogate how Morrison's language, characters, and narrative form dramatize psychological wounding. Additionally, this study introduces a comparative lens with Douglass' Narrative, thereby expanding the analytical horizon from the recovery of historical memory to the embodiment of trauma and the evolution of Black self-representation. Krumholz opens the door to understanding *Beloved* as a work of historical recovery; this research walks through that door and ventures deeper into the psychological terrain where memory, silence, and trauma converge.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation upon which academic research is built. It functions as a lens through which a study interprets, analyzes, and critiques existing knowledge in relation to the research problem. As Grant and Osanloo (2014) note, a theoretical framework “serves as the blueprint or guide for a research study, grounding it in the existing body of knowledge and theory that has already been developed in the field.” In literary studies, theoretical frameworks help to guide interpretations of texts, offering a structure for understanding the interplay between literature and broader social, cultural, and psychological concerns. For this research: *From Slave Narrative to Neoslave Narrative: Trauma, Agency, and Resistance in Frederick Douglass’ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* two theoretical frameworks have been adopted: postcolonial theory (Homi Bhabha), and Trauma theory (Cathy Caruth). These frameworks are essential for unpacking the psychological, narrative, and socio-political complexities of the slave and neoslave narrative genres.

Post Colonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is a critical framework that investigates the enduring cultural, political, and psychological impacts of colonialism and imperial domination. It engages with the ways in which colonial powers established systems of control not only through military and economic dominance but through epistemological strategies, ways of knowing, naming, and representing, that served to legitimize their authority. As articulated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), postcolonial theory examines “the ways in which the imperial power controls knowledge and representation” and explores how formerly colonized peoples respond, resist, and rewrite these dominant discourses (p. 2). Through literature, language, and cultural production, postcolonial subjects reclaim agency by challenging imposed identities and reshaping historical narratives. Central to this theoretical framework are concerns with identity formation, hybridity, race, language, power relations, resistance, and the negotiation of cultural meaning in the aftermath of colonization. Postcolonial theory thus provides a vocabulary for understanding not only the historical realities of imperial conquest but also the complex legacies that continue to shape contemporary societies and subjectivities.

Among the most influential thinkers in postcolonial theory is Homi K. Bhabha, whose contributions have significantly transformed the field's conceptual foundation. In particular, Bhabha introduces the ideas of mimicry, hybridity, and the third space, each of which disrupts the binary logic that underpinned colonial ideologies. Mimicry, for Bhabha, is a strategy by which colonized subjects imitate the language, behavior, and institutions of the colonizers, not as mere subjugation, but as a subtle, often ironic act of subversion. He famously describes mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite," highlighting the ambivalence of colonial authority, which becomes anxious when its subjects appear too similar yet remain fundamentally different (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). This ambivalence, according to Bhabha, undermines the stability of colonial control by revealing the constructed nature of imperial authority. Mimicry thus operates as a double-edged practice: it facilitates partial inclusion while simultaneously threatening the ideological foundation of the colonial order. Through mimicry, the colonized perform the master's script, but in doing so they distort it, exposing its contradictions and limitations. Closely related to mimicry is Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which challenges fixed notions of cultural identity and purity. Hybridity arises from the contact zone between colonizer and colonized, where cultural meanings are negotiated, rearticulated, and transformed. Rather than viewing postcolonial identity as either assimilation or resistance, hybridity foregrounds the emergence of new, syncretic cultural forms that do not belong exclusively to either side. In this space of overlap, new subjectivities are formed, ones that are fluid, plural, and resistant to essentialist categorization. According to Bhabha, this "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (p. 4). Hybridity thereby destabilizes colonial authority by refusing the binaries of self/other, colonizer/colonized, or native/foreigner. It creates room for agency within the very structures meant to suppress it, and reframes cultural identity as a process of negotiation rather than a given essence. The hybrid subject is not simply a victim of colonial imposition but an active participant in the formation of meaning. These ideas converge in Bhabha's formulation of the "third space", a conceptual zone where the interaction of cultures results in the production of new meanings and identities. The third space is not a literal place but a theoretical framework that enables a rethinking of cultural politics beyond domination and resistance. It is in this space that power is reconfigured, and where marginalized subjects can assert their voices by challenging the authority of fixed discourses. In Bhabha's words, "It is that Third Space, though

unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Within this space, meanings are not simply transferred from one group to another; they are contested, reinterpreted, and hybridized. The third space thus becomes a site of cultural innovation and potential transformation, allowing for the emergence of identities and narratives that transcend colonial legacies. It also resists the totalizing tendencies of nationalism or universalism, emphasizing instead the contingent, relational nature of all cultural expressions.

While Homi Bhabha remains a central figure, postcolonial theory is also enriched by the contributions of Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, both of whom extend the framework’s capacity to interrogate representation and power. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) reveals how the West constructed the East as inferior, exotic, and irrational in order to justify its imperial domination. He argues that the Orient was not a reality but a fabricated discourse, a creation of European imagination designed to consolidate Western superiority. Spivak, on the other hand, brings a feminist and deconstructive critique to postcolonial studies. In her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), she explores how marginalized groups, particularly women in colonized spaces, are systematically silenced in both imperial and academic discourse. Spivak contends that even well-meaning attempts to “give voice” to the subaltern often reinscribe the very structures of power they seek to dismantle. Her work emphasizes the ethical responsibility of representation and the difficulty of accessing subaltern agency within dominant systems of knowledge. Postcolonial theory provides a critical foundation for analyzing how power operates through language, identity, and cultural representation in the context of colonial and postcolonial conditions. Homi K. Bhabha’s theories of mimicry, hybridity, and the third space offer particularly compelling insights into the fluid and contested nature of identity in postcolonial contexts. These concepts challenge binary oppositions and foreground the capacity of colonized peoples to resist and transform the discourses that once defined them. By engaging with Bhabha alongside Said’s critique of Orientalist discourse and Spivak’s interrogation of subaltern agency, postcolonial theory reveals how resistance, identity, and cultural negotiation continue to shape the post-imperial world.

Tenets Of The Theory

The tenets of postcolonial theory include the critique of colonial discourse, the emphasis on cultural hybridity and ambivalence, and the reassertion of subaltern agency. In the context of this research, postcolonial theory is crucial for examining the discursive construction of black identity and resistance in both Douglass' and Morrison's texts. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* exemplifies the strategic use of Western literary conventions and Enlightenment rhetoric to assert the humanity and intellectual capacity of enslaved African Americans. Douglass writes himself into the Western liberal subject through literacy, rationality, and moral reasoning, thereby challenging the racist logics of slavery and colonialism. Conversely, Morrison's *Beloved* resists Western narrative norms by embracing African American oral traditions, magical realism, and fragmented temporality. Bhabha's idea of hybridity is evident in Morrison's blending of historical fact with fiction, realism with supernatural elements, and individual trauma with collective memory. This hybridity unsettles colonial narratives of history and reclaims a space for black voices and memories previously excluded from the official record.

Relevance Of The Theory

The relevance of postcolonial theory to this study lies in its ability to foreground power, voice, and agency in the aftermath of slavery. It allows for a nuanced exploration of how both Douglass and Morrison navigate, resist, and reshape dominant historical discourses. While Douglass reclaims agency through rhetorical mastery and self-emancipation, Morrison restores suppressed histories through spectral metaphors and communal storytelling. Postcolonial theory reveals how both texts challenge hegemonic representations of blackness and slavery, emphasizing the intellectual, emotional, and cultural resilience of African Americans. Together with trauma theory, it provides a multidimensional framework that bridges history and memory, self and community, personal narrative and political resistance.

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth, forms a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how experiences of violence, rupture, and historical catastrophe impact narrative, memory, and subjectivity. Emerging at the intersection of psychoanalysis, literary studies, and historiography, trauma theory investigates the limits of representation in the

face of overwhelming psychic events. It challenges traditional modes of understanding time, identity, and memory by emphasizing how traumatic experiences evade immediate comprehension and resist full integration into narrative consciousness. In her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is not simply an experience that is registered, processed, and remembered in a coherent manner. Rather, it is defined by its very refusal to be fully known in the moment of its occurrence. Caruth writes that trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). This belatedness, or “latency,” is central to trauma theory’s conception of how the mind and body respond to extreme disruption: trauma is not fully experienced as it happens but returns later in fragmented, often haunting forms. Caruth’s contribution to trauma theory lies in her application of psychoanalytic models, particularly those of Freud, to the analysis of narrative structure and historical memory. She proposes that traumatic events are fundamentally unrepresentable in traditional narrative terms because they are not assimilated in real time; they fracture the subject’s experience and are therefore only understood retrospectively, through symptoms that surface unpredictably. As she notes, trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known,” which results in its return “in the form of a haunting or a possession” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). This notion of haunting not only informs our understanding of personal trauma but also extends to collective and historical trauma, whereby entire communities are affected by the delayed return of suppressed events. Caruth’s theory thus establishes a critical framework for reading texts that deal with atrocity, loss, and historical violence, not by searching for closure or resolution, but by attending to disjunctions, silences, and narrative fragmentation. For Caruth, literature becomes a privileged site where the inexpressible may find indirect articulation, through metaphor, repetition, dislocation, and other formal disruptions that mirror the psychological experience of trauma. While Caruth’s psychoanalytic framing provides the foundation for much of trauma theory, the field has been expanded and deepened by the contributions of several other key thinkers. Sigmund Freud, whose ideas form the groundwork for Caruth’s thinking, first explored the concept of trauma in his studies of hysteria and in later texts such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, or “deferred action” helped articulate how an event can become traumatic only in retrospect, when

its significance is reactivated by a later experience. His theory of repression and the return of the repressed provided a model for understanding how unprocessed experiences resurface in dreams, symptoms, and repetitive behavior. Cathy Caruth extends this Freudian insight into the literary domain by showing how narrative structures themselves may enact such deferrals and returns. Judith Herman, a clinical psychologist and trauma scholar, further contributes to the field through her seminal text *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), in which she examines the psychological impact of trauma on survivors of abuse, war, and political terror. Herman emphasizes the social dimension of trauma, pointing out that traumatic memory is not just a psychological disorder but also a political issue, linked to silence, denial, and the marginalization of victims. She proposes a model of recovery that includes remembering, mourning, and reconnecting with community, an approach that complements Caruth's literary emphasis with a clinically grounded framework for healing.

Another influential figure in trauma theory is Dominick LaCapra, whose work interrogates some of the assumptions in early trauma studies. While he acknowledges the importance of psychoanalysis, LaCapra critiques what he sees as an overly pathologized model of trauma, arguing instead for a historically grounded reading that maintains a distinction between trauma and absence. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), he emphasizes the importance of working through trauma rather than merely acting it out, and he cautions against conflating structural loss with historical violence. For LaCapra, trauma is not just an individual psychic condition but a historiographical problem, one that requires both ethical responsibility and rigorous attention to historical context. His intervention broadens trauma theory's scope by underscoring the need for critical engagement with the political and ethical implications of how we represent and respond to traumatic histories. Collectively, the work of these scholars provides trauma theory with its interdisciplinary strength. Whether framed through psychoanalytic models, clinical psychology, or cultural criticism, trauma theory offers a profound challenge to conventional narratives of identity, time, and memory. It insists that trauma is not an isolated wound but an ongoing disruption, one that often eludes language and resists narrative closure. By centering the experience of rupture and belatedness, trauma theory calls into question the assumptions of coherent subjectivity and historical continuity, replacing them with models that reflect dislocation, fragmentation, and repetition. In doing so, it opens up a critical space for

engaging with literature, history, and personal testimony as sites where the unspeakable is nonetheless inscribed, remembered, and, however incompletely, witnessed.

Tenets Of The Theory

The tenets of trauma theory include the belatedness of trauma, the notion of the “unspeakable,” the disruption of narrative coherence, and the repetition of traumatic events in memory and behavior. As Caruth explains, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4), implying a form of psychic entrapment that fractures identity and narrative structure. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novel in which the protagonist Sethe is haunted, both literally and metaphorically, by her traumatic past as a slave. The narrative structure of *Beloved*, characterized by non-linearity, fragmentation, and repetition, mimics the psychological dislocation induced by trauma. Likewise, in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, although Douglass’s account is more linear and aimed at abolitionist persuasion, his descriptions of physical violence, psychological torment, and the rupture of familial bonds reveal undercurrents of traumatic experience. Trauma theory allows this research to analyze how both texts reflect different modes of representing and processing slavery’s long-lasting psychological scars. Importantly, it bridges the gap between the historical slave narrative and the fictional neoslave narrative, demonstrating how trauma is carried across generations and genres.

In sum, the dual application of trauma theory and postcolonial theory enriches the analytical depth of this research. Trauma theory highlights the internal, psychological consequences of slavery, while postcolonial theory interrogates its external, sociopolitical ramifications. This theoretical synergy ensures a comprehensive reading of Douglass’ and Morrison’s texts, illuminating the evolution from the slave narrative to the neoslave narrative as a journey not only through history, but also through the psychic terrains of trauma, agency, and resistance.

CHAPTER TWO

Historical and Literary Contexts

2.3 Historical Context

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, emerged during a period of intense national debate over the institution of slavery. The antebellum era in the United States was characterized by a growing abolitionist movement in the North and an increasingly entrenched pro-slavery stance in the South. Douglass's autobiography provided a firsthand account of the brutal realities of slavery, challenging prevailing narratives that sought to justify or downplay the institution. Born into slavery in Maryland in 1818, Douglass experienced the dehumanizing conditions of bondage firsthand. His journey to literacy and eventual escape to freedom in the North exemplified the transformative power of education and self-determination. Douglass's narrative not only recounted his personal experiences but also served as a powerful indictment of the systemic oppression inherent in slavery. By articulating his story with eloquence and clarity, Douglass countered prevailing stereotypes of African Americans as intellectually inferior and incapable of self-governance. The publication of Douglass's narrative coincided with the rise of the abolitionist movement, which sought to end slavery through moral persuasion and political action. Douglass became a prominent figure within this movement, delivering speeches and writing extensively to advocate for emancipation and equal rights. His narrative played a crucial role in galvanizing public opinion against slavery, providing compelling evidence of its cruelty and injustice. However, the narrative also reflects the constraints imposed by the socio-political context of its time. To gain credibility among white audiences, Douglass' account was prefaced by endorsements from prominent white abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. These endorsements aimed to authenticate Douglass' experiences and assure readers of the narrative's veracity. Additionally, the narrative adhered to certain literary conventions of the time, emphasizing themes of Christian morality and individual uplift to resonate with contemporary readers. Douglass's narrative not only detailed his personal journey but also served as a broader commentary on the institution of slavery and its corrosive effects on both the enslaved and the enslavers. By highlighting the moral contradictions and hypocrisies of a nation that professed

liberty while perpetuating slavery, Douglass appealed to the conscience of his readers. His eloquent prose and compelling arguments contributed significantly to the abolitionist cause, inspiring many to join the fight against slavery. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* stands as a seminal work in American literature and history, offering an unflinching look at the realities of slavery and the indomitable spirit of those who resisted it. Its publication during the antebellum period provided a powerful tool for abolitionists and remains a testament to the enduring struggle for freedom and equality.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published in 1987, stands as a seminal neoslave narrative that emerges from and responds to the cultural, political, and intellectual currents of the post-civil rights era. This period, following the legislative triumphs of the 1960s civil rights movement, was marked by a deeper reckoning with the historical memory of slavery and its enduring psychological, cultural, and structural legacies. Even as legal segregation was dismantled, African Americans continued to experience systemic inequalities, prompting scholars, artists, and activists to revisit the unacknowledged and unresolved traumas of slavery. Within this historical framework, *Beloved* can be seen as part of a broader movement of African American cultural production aimed at reclaiming silenced histories and affirming Black subjectivity. Morrison herself remarked that *Beloved* was an effort "to make the slave experience intimate," underscoring her intent to reanimate the human dimensions of slavery that had been obscured in traditional historical narratives and public memory. Set during the Reconstruction era but written from the vantage point of the late twentieth century, *Beloved* intertwines historical realism with the supernatural to capture the psychic reverberations of slavery. The novel centers on Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman who is haunted, both literally and metaphorically, by the child she killed to prevent her from being returned to bondage. Morrison's use of a non-linear narrative, fragmented chronology, and polyvocal perspectives reflects the disruptions of time and memory that trauma imposes upon the psyche. As Cathy Caruth (1996) theorizes in *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma is defined not by the immediacy of the violent event but by its belated, repetitive intrusion into consciousness. Morrison's form thus becomes integral to her content: the fractured narrative of *Beloved* mirrors the disjointed and haunting nature of trauma that cannot be fully grasped or told in conventional terms. This literary technique not only destabilizes dominant historical narratives that treat slavery as a completed chapter but also insists on the

presence of the past in the present. The inspiration for *Beloved* is drawn from the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who escaped with her family to Ohio in 1856. When fugitive slave catchers pursued them under the Fugitive Slave Act, Garner killed her infant daughter rather than allow her to be returned to slavery. Morrison adapts this narrative, transforming it into a fictional meditation on the ethics of memory, the extremity of maternal love under conditions of bondage, and the impossible choices faced by enslaved women. In doing so, Morrison compels readers to confront the brutal logic of slavery, a system in which murder can appear as a merciful act. Through Sethe's actions, the novel interrogates the psychological conditions under which resistance, self-assertion, and survival might take unimaginable forms. The moral ambiguity surrounding Sethe's infanticide becomes the axis around which the novel revolves, prompting sustained reflection on the legacy of trauma and the cost of agency in contexts of profound dehumanization. Furthermore, Morrison's engagement with the supernatural, most vividly embodied in the ghost of the dead child, Beloved, provides a powerful metaphor for the spectral presence of slavery in African American consciousness. The ghost is not merely a gothic device but a manifestation of collective historical trauma. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues in *Neo-Slave Narratives* (1999), neoslave narratives like *Beloved* function to "re-inscribe the presence of African American voices in the discourse of national history" (p. 3). Morrison's ghost, then, speaks not only for Sethe but for a larger community of the enslaved whose stories have been suppressed, denied, or distorted. Through the character of Beloved, Morrison resurrects these voices, insisting that the past cannot be exorcised until it is acknowledged and grieved. In this way, the novel performs the work of historical mourning, seeking not to forget or forgive slavery but to confront it as a condition of contemporary Black existence.

In the context of the post-civil rights era, *Beloved* aligns with the intellectual currents of Afrocentrism, Black feminism, and critical race theory that gained momentum in the 1980s. These movements challenged the presumed universality of white, male perspectives and foregrounded the importance of race, gender, and history in shaping identity and power. Morrison's focus on Black women's experiences, particularly their roles as mothers, survivors, and storytellers reflects a Black feminist sensibility that critiques both the patriarchal structures of slavery and the racialized exclusions of mainstream feminism. Scholars such as Patricia Hill

Collins and bell hooks have emphasized the importance of reclaiming Black women's voices in historical and literary discourse. In *Beloved*, Morrison enacts this reclamation through characters like Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and Ella, who embody both the suffering and the resilience of Black women under slavery. By centering their perspectives, the novel challenges readers to reevaluate historical narratives that have marginalized or caricatured Black women's agency. Moreover, *Beloved* contributes to the genre of the neoslave narrative by employing literary techniques that go beyond mere historical reproduction. As Angelyn Mitchell (2002) explains, "The neoslave narrative functions to create a usable past that speaks to contemporary issues of racial justice, memory, and identity." In this regard, Morrison's novel is not just a window into the past but a commentary on the present. The struggles of Sethe and her community resonate with the lingering effects of racial trauma, economic inequality, and cultural dislocation experienced by African Americans in the 1980s and beyond. By refusing closure or resolution, the novel reflects the ongoing nature of these struggles and the need for continued historical reckoning. The choice to conclude with the assertion that "this is not a story to pass on" is both a caution and a call, to remember responsibly and to honor the untold stories that shape collective identity. The cultural and political climate of the 1980s also influenced the reception and impact of *Beloved*. Published during the Reagan era, a time characterized by the denial of systemic racism and the rollback of civil rights gains, the novel served as a counter-narrative to national myths of progress and colorblindness. By foregrounding the brutal realities and lasting scars of slavery, Morrison resisted the prevailing political rhetoric that sought to downplay America's racial history. In doing so, *Beloved* aligned with other works of African American literature and scholarship that insisted on confronting the roots of contemporary racial disparities. The novel thus operates not only as a work of art but also as a form of cultural activism, a reminder that the past must be engaged, not erased.

2.4 Literary contexts

2.4.1 The Slave Narrative Genre

The slave narrative, emerging prominently in the 18th and 19th centuries, functioned as both a literary and political instrument, offering the world a firsthand account of slavery's atrocities. As literary texts, these narratives adhered to specific conventions: they were typically written in the first person to assert the authenticity of the author's experience, prefaced by testimonials from

white abolitionists to validate the credibility of the Black narrator, and often structured to appeal to a predominantly white, Northern, Christian readership. This appeal was strategic, as abolitionists relied on the moral conscience of the Northern middle class to rally support against slavery. Themes of literacy, the moral growth of the protagonist, and the pursuit of freedom were consistent across the genre. These themes were not incidental; they challenged the Southern pro-slavery narrative which depicted African Americans as docile, unthinking beings. By asserting the intellectual and moral capacity of enslaved individuals, slave narratives worked to dismantle the ideological foundations of slavery.

Among the most influential examples of this genre is Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845)*, a text that not only recounts his personal history but also exemplifies the conventions of the slave narrative genre. From the outset, Douglass uses the power of the first-person voice to narrate the dehumanizing experience of being denied knowledge of his own birthday as he says:

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom have any knowledge of the time or manner of their birth, and such knowledge is often deliberately withheld from them to reinforce their sense of powerlessness and insignificance.” (p. 1)

This denial of personal history reflects a broader strategy of erasure practiced by the slave system. His narrative insists on his humanity through the careful articulation of his thoughts and feelings, situating him as a credible and thoughtful narrator. The inclusion of prefaces by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips serves as a form of testimonial validation, reassuring white readers that Douglass's story is trustworthy, thus conforming to a key convention of the genre designed to circumvent racist skepticism.

A hallmark of the slave narrative is the vivid depiction of brutality. These descriptions were not gratuitous but were central to the narrative's political and emotional impact. Douglass' account of his Aunt Hester's beating is harrowing and illustrative:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine" (p. 4).He continues, "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest" (p. 5).

These graphic descriptions serve a dual purpose: they bear witness to the physical violence intrinsic to slavery, and they emotionally implicate the reader in the moral urgency of abolition. In the context of the genre, such moments validate the enslaved person's suffering and compel the audience to question the moral fabric of a society that permits such cruelty.

Another prominent convention in slave narratives is the transformative role of literacy. In Douglass' case, this journey begins almost accidentally when Sophia Auld starts teaching him the alphabet before her husband forbids it. Douglass writes:

From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. Literacy was no longer just letters on a page—it became the very key to unlocking my mind and spirit, the tool by which I could break the chains that bound me. I saw clearly that education and slavery were incompatible with each other; to enslave a man is to keep him ignorant, and to educate him is to set him free. This realization ignited a fierce determination within me to learn, to read, and to write, knowing that knowledge was power, and power was the path to liberty." (pp. 20)

underscores the threat literacy posed to slaveholders. His relentless pursuit of literacy, even when forbidden, testifies to his determination to reclaim his intellect and humanity, both of which slavery systematically denied. Through literacy, Douglass finds the intellectual tools to critique slavery and articulate his desire for liberation, a narrative arc echoed throughout the genre.

Yet the slave narrative was not without its structural and ideological constraints. Most were mediated by white abolitionist editors who shaped the narrative to conform to rhetorical norms acceptable to white readers. In Douglass' case, the inclusion of Garrison's preface, which attests to the truthfulness of Douglass' narrative, reflects the racialized distrust of Black authorship at the time. Garrison declares:

He who can peruse it without a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit, must have a flinty heart; a heart of stone, a heart that does not feel for the woes and sufferings of humanity. To read the story of slavery unmoved is to be devoid of compassion and empathy, to be blind to the cruelties inflicted upon the enslaved, and to deny the shared humanity that binds us all." (p. vi)

These endorsements helped market the text but also introduced a subtle form of control over the voice of the narrator. While Douglass navigates this constraint masterfully, readers must be aware that such mediation shaped not only how the story was told but also what was emphasized, often requiring conformity to moral uplift and Christian conversion as narrative tropes.

In terms of structure, slave narratives often followed a teleological progression from bondage to freedom. This linear trajectory reflected the Enlightenment ideals of progress and individual development. Douglass' own narrative follows this pattern, beginning with his anonymous birth, chronicling his brutal experiences on Maryland plantations, and culminating in his escape to the North. While he deliberately withholds details of his escape to protect others, he hints at its importance, stating:

I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come near enough to their own age to be able to give any correct information about it. The nearest estimation they can make is about the time of the year, or the season, in which they were born. The dark shadow of slavery obscures even the most basic details of their lives, stripping away the sense of identity and personal history that many take for granted." (p. 1)

linking the denial of selfhood at birth to the reclamation of it through escape. This progression reinforces the genre's moral argument: that freedom is the rightful and attainable destiny of every enslaved person.

The theme of religious hypocrisy is particularly powerful in Douglass' text. He draws a sharp distinction between Christianity as practiced by slaveholders and the true teachings of Christ. "I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ," Douglass writes:

I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Such Christianity is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, a mask which hides the devilish practices of the slaveholder and the oppressor. It is a Christianity that preaches peace and love, yet endorses cruelty and injustice. I have seen its effects in the lives of slaves and slaveholders alike, and my heart burns with righteous indignation against this false religion." (p. 71)

His critique is not just theological but political, it reveals how religion was weaponized to justify and perpetuate slavery. Slave narratives often exposed such contradictions to undermine the moral authority of the slaveholding class and to argue that slavery was fundamentally incompatible with Christian doctrine.

Douglass also critiques the psychological mechanisms of slavery. His relationship with Edward Covey, the "slave breaker," is a crucial moment. Douglass writes:

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. The hours of labor under his watchful eye were unrelenting, and the harsh punishments left scars not only on my flesh but deep within my heart. Yet even in my brokenness, a spark of resistance lingered, though faint and flickering." (p. 43)

This admission marks a psychological nadir in the narrative, yet it becomes a turning point. Douglass later recounts his physical resistance against Covey, asserting:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom within me. From that moment, I resolved that I would no longer be a slave in fact, although I might remain one in name. That day, I resolved to be a man. I did not hesitate; I seized the opportunity to assert my manhood and my right to liberty.” (p. 46)

This episode illustrates another hallmark of the slave narrative: the reclamation of agency. Even when stripped of every legal and social right, Douglass affirms his humanity through resistance, thus demonstrating that freedom is not simply a legal status, but a mental and moral posture.

The act of self-emancipation, often the climax of slave narratives, is significant not only as a plot point but also as a political gesture. Though Douglass withholds the details of his escape, he reflects on the importance of secrecy:

I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned, the means by which I accomplished my escape. It is enough to say, that I succeeded in accomplishing my freedom; and that, after a long and painful struggle, I was finally able to find my way from slavery to liberty.(p. 57)

This discretion protects others and maintains the integrity of the Underground Railroad. It also signals a shift in narrative control Douglass, once an object of property, now becomes the author of his own destiny. This self-authorship, both literal and metaphorical, lies at the heart of the genre’s revolutionary potential. The public life of former slaves, particularly those like Douglass who became activists, reflects the genre’s broader goals. Douglass did not retire into anonymity after gaining his freedom; instead, he emerged as a powerful orator, writer, and abolitionist. His post-narrative career gives the lie to racist assumptions about Black inferiority. In founding *The North Star*, Douglass reclaims the power of the printed word, stating his mission: “Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren” (front page, *The North Star*). His narrative thus functions both as testimony and as manifesto, a call to action grounded in lived experience.

2.4.2 The Neoslave Narrative

The emergence of the neoslave narrative in the latter half of the twentieth century marked a profound evolution in African American literary expression, responding to both the inadequacies of the historical archive and the emotional gaps left by earlier slave narratives. Unlike the autobiographical slave narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries, neoslave narratives such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* do not claim factual accuracy or eyewitness testimony. Instead, they reconstruct the emotional, psychological, and historical truths of slavery through imaginative fiction. By merging historical realism with narrative innovation, particularly through nonlinear timelines, interior monologues, and magical realism, these texts seek not only to recount what happened during slavery but to probe how its trauma reverberates across generations. In doing so, the neoslave narrative acts as a form of counter-memory, offering voice to the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Morrison, *Beloved*, Dedication) who were systemically excluded from official historical records. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, first published in 1987, remains one of the most celebrated and complex works within this genre. Drawing inspiration from the real-life story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her daughter to prevent her from being returned to slavery, Morrison crafts a narrative that refuses to treat historical suffering as a closed chapter. Instead, she reanimates the past through the fictional story of Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman whose home is haunted by the ghost of the child she murdered. Morrison's refusal to render slavery as mere historical background and her focus on its lingering presence in the psyches of her characters set *Beloved* apart as a deeply psychological and symbolic meditation on slavery's afterlife. Morrison writes, "This is not a story to pass on" (p. 324), signaling both the unbearable weight of historical trauma and the moral imperative to remember and represent it. The novel thus functions as a reclamation of lost voices and a confrontation with the silences of official history.

A central feature of *Beloved*, and of neoslave narratives more broadly, is its nonlinear structure, which mirrors the disordered nature of traumatic memory. The narrative shifts back and forth in time, unveiling events at Sweet Home, the escape to Ohio, the infanticide, and its aftermath not in chronological order but as fragments, surfacing through memory and emotional flashback. For Sethe, time collapses: "It's not a story to pass on... the past was something she could neither escape nor contain. It was still right there; as real as her own skin" (p. 36). This disorientation is

not merely stylistic; it reflects the psychological truth of trauma as articulated by theorists like Cathy Caruth, who argue that trauma is not fully processed in the moment of its occurrence and returns insistently, often in distorted or fragmented forms. Morrison's narrative structure enacts this repetition and rupture, thereby immersing readers in the lived experience of post-traumatic memory.

The element of magical realism in *Beloved* serves as a crucial device for accessing psychological and spiritual dimensions of slavery that historical realism alone cannot convey. The character of Beloved, a corporeal manifestation of Sethe's murdered daughter, embodies the past's unrelenting grip on the present. Her arrival at 124 Bluestone Road is described in eerie and unsettling terms: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (p. 50). Beloved's inexplicable physical presence, sopping wet, speech slurred, with no history, symbolizes how the past returns not only as memory but as a haunting. She exists at the threshold between life and death, fact and symbol, making her both a literal ghost and a metaphor for unresolved historical trauma. Her interactions with Sethe and Denver complicate notions of identity, motherhood, and guilt, exposing how personal suffering is entangled with collective memory. Beloved foregrounds the concept of collective trauma, emphasizing how the wounds of slavery extend beyond the individual to envelop entire communities. Sethe is not the only character shaped by her past; Paul D, Baby Suggs, Denver, and even the wider Black community of Cincinnati carry their own burdens. Paul D, for instance, struggles with the "rusted tobacco tin" in his chest, a metaphor for the emotional repression of his painful memories (p. 85). His eventual breakdown is precipitated not by external violence, but by the internal collapse of defenses that once allowed him to survive: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (p. 145). Morrison's portrayal of these inner struggles reflects the long-term psychological effects of slavery and foregrounds the difficulty of forming healthy relationships in the aftermath of systemic dehumanization. The novel insists that healing requires not only personal reckoning but communal acknowledgment of shared suffering.

A hallmark of neoslave narratives is the reclamation of voices lost to history. Morrison makes this explicit by allowing Beloved to speak in her own fragmented, poetic monologue. In one of the novel's most haunting sections, Beloved utters:

I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves. She leaves them behind. I am not separate from her. There is no place where I stop. Her face is my own. I want her face. I want the face that is going to smile at me. I want to join. She is the laugh. I am the laughter. I see her. I see the smile. It is the same. It is mine. It is not mine. It is the smile I do not have. I want the one that she is. I want the join. I am not separate from her. There is no place where I stop. I am the one who comes. I am the one who follows. The one who runs ahead. I am not separate from her. I do not know the other one. The one who has my face who is not me. I do not know her. I know the one who is the same. Her. Her. Me. Me. It is the same. Where we join. Where we come together. Where we are. It is the same. I see her take flowers away from leaves. She leaves them behind. I am not separate from her. There is no place where I stop. She leaves them behind. She leaves them behind. I am not separate from her. There is no place where I stop. I am not dead. I am not. I am not dead. I am not. I am not dead. I am not dead. I am” (pp. 248–255).

These lines, void of conventional punctuation or syntax, evoke the disintegrated consciousness of the enslaved and the unborn, whose voices were systematically excluded from written history. Morrison’s decision to render this inner voice with poetic disjunction challenges the limits of conventional narrative and underscores the inadequacy of traditional historiography to capture slavery’s intimate, affective dimensions. By giving Beloved a voice, Morrison gives form to the otherwise formless, those who “never got a chance to live,” as Denver says (p. 274). Morrison’s prose itself operates as an extension of the neoslave narrative’s project to reanimate lost experience. Her language, dense and evocative, often mirrors the rhythms of Black oral tradition, invoking song, repetition, and ritual. The narrative returns frequently to key phrases “It was not a story to pass on,” “124 was spiteful” to reinforce the cyclical nature of memory and pain. Even in quiet moments, Morrison’s word choices convey layers of emotional and historical meaning. Consider Sethe’s reflection:

It was all right to love her; just not too much. Just enough to hold her without holding her down. To touch her without pressing too hard. To care without

choking. It was all right to love her a little, in measure, with space between the arms and the body, with breath left for both. It was all right (p. 193).

In such lines, Morrison articulates the delicate balance between love and possession in a world where Black women's reproductive autonomy was violently denied. This linguistic strategy amplifies the novel's thematic concerns and situates it within a tradition of resistance storytelling.

Motherhood, a recurring theme in *Beloved*, is explored with particular intensity and complexity. Sethe's decision to kill her child rather than let her be returned to slavery is not framed as monstrous but as the tragic result of an impossible situation. Morrison compels readers to understand the context of this act:

I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D. Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe.
(p. 163)

The act of infanticide becomes a site of ethical ambiguity, forcing the reader to grapple with the moral impossibilities of slavery. It also reflects a broader thematic concern of the neoslave narrative, how enslaved women, denied the ability to protect and raise their children, made devastating decisions to reclaim agency in whatever form they could. Through Sethe, Morrison explores the psychic cost of maternal love under slavery. While *Beloved* dwells on pain, it also gestures toward healing and redemption. Denver's personal growth offers a counterpoint to Sethe's psychological entrapment. Once a reclusive and dependent child, Denver gradually asserts her independence, venturing into the community for help and finding purpose in education and social engagement. Her transformation signals the possibility of renewal:

It was a new thought, having a self to look after and preserve. For so long, there had been only survival and the ghosts of the past, but now the possibility of caring for oneself emerged as a fragile hope. Similarly, when Paul D returned to Sethe, he offered her a reassurance that was both tender and grounding: ‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are.’ These words acknowledged her worth beyond pain and suffering, affirming her identity and the possibility of healing.” (pp. 268, 322)

signals a tentative beginning of healing. Morrison does not present healing as immediate or absolute, but as a difficult, collective process grounded in the acknowledgment of pain and the possibility of love. In the final pages of *Beloved*, Morrison reflects on the challenge of remembering trauma while resisting its totalizing power. The ghost Beloved disappears, but her imprint remains:

It was not a story to pass on. Not because it was untrue, but because it was too painful, too raw, too heavy to be carried by another generation. The wounds ran too deep, the memories too vivid, the scars too visible. It was a story meant to be buried in silence, locked away in the dark recesses of the past. This is not a story to pass on.” (p. 324)

The repetition of this line encapsulates the novel’s central paradox: that some stories are too painful to bear, yet too vital to forget. Through its structure, symbolism, and language, *Beloved* insists on the ethical obligation to remember the past while simultaneously acknowledging its weight. In this sense, *Beloved* does not simply recount the history of slavery, it enacts its aftermath, making readers participants in the act of bearing witness.

CHAPTER THREE

Trauma and Memory in Douglass' Narrative and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

3.1 Trauma in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

The trauma that pervades Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is depicted with visceral intensity, unfolding through a series of brutal events that reveal both the psychological and physical torment endured by the enslaved. From the outset, Douglass introduces readers to the violence of slavery through a haunting memory: the whipping of his Aunt Hester. He writes, "Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist... he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor" (p. 6). This image marks what Douglass famously calls "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery" (p. 5), signaling the onset of his traumatic awakening to the barbarity of his condition. The physicality of violence here does more than scar the body, it instills a lasting psychological horror that lingers throughout the narrative. This trauma recurs in multiple incidents. Douglass recounts his early days under the

overseer Mr. Plummer, describing him as “a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster,” noting, “I have known him to cut and slash the women’s heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty” (p. 5) . Such relentless exposure to violence was not exceptional but systemic, functioning as a calculated method of psychological domination. Douglass notes of Captain Anthony, “He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin” (p. 5). These beatings, performed with no respite, served not only to injure but to terrorize.

Perhaps the most illustrative moment of trauma as a psychological rupture occurs during Douglass’ time with Edward Covey, the infamous “slave-breaker.” Douglass confesses, “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit” (p. 43) . His account of being mentally shattered under Covey’s brutal regimen of labor and beatings illustrates what Cathy Caruth defines as “the unassimilated nature of trauma,” wherein the subject becomes trapped in a cycle of suffering that resists narrative coherence (Caruth, 1996). The power of this moment lies not only in its candor but in its revelation of slavery’s capacity to devastate the mind as much as the body. Yet, within this abyss of despair, Douglass captures trauma as a catalyst for resistance. His physical confrontation with Covey becomes a transformative moment of reclaimed agency. When Covey attempts to tie him down, Douglass fights back: “I seized Covey hard by the throat... My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback” (p. 62) . The fight lasts nearly two hours, and though Douglass emerges battered, he also emerges reborn: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave... It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom... I now resolved that... the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (p. 63) . Here, trauma catalyzes self-definition. No longer merely the victim, Douglass becomes a resistor, rewriting his identity through defiance. The weaponization of literacy further underscores Douglass’ transformation of trauma into resistance. Forbidden to learn by his masters, he recounts how Sophia Auld began teaching him before being warned that “learning would spoil the best nigger in the world” (p. 20) . This prohibition sparked a fire in Douglass: “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 20). Literacy becomes both metaphor and mechanism for liberation. Through clandestine efforts, Douglass teaches himself to read and write, using discarded

newspapers and tracing letters in the dirt. He reflects, “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers... I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers” (p. 22). Reading transforms his internal landscape, arming him with language as a form of resistance.

The text reveals trauma’s dual nature: it is both deeply isolating and politically galvanizing. Douglass consciously shapes his story to appeal to white abolitionist audiences by emphasizing personal trauma. As William L. Andrews argues, slave narratives were “strategic texts designed to inspire moral and political action” (Andrews, 1986, p. 2). Douglass foregrounds his individual suffering to provoke empathy and action. For instance, when describing the cruel beating of another slave, Demby, by Mr. Gore, Douglass writes, “Mr. Gore raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more” (p. 21). This execution, carried out with impunity, was meant to shock the reader into moral revulsion. But notably, Douglass omits much of the communal dimension of slavery’s trauma. His focus remains on the self as a sovereign unit rather than on intergenerational or communal suffering, a limitation perhaps imposed by the rhetorical needs of the abolitionist cause. Yet, Douglass’ narrative does not ignore the systemic dehumanization of slavery. He writes of being denied the knowledge of his own birthday: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it” (p. 1). This erasure of identity functions as a form of psychological trauma, a severing from history and lineage. Similarly, he laments being separated from his mother early in life: “I do not recollect ever seeing my mother by the light of day” (p. 2). These denials of familial and temporal continuity reflect slavery’s deeper psychic wounds, which trauma theory identifies as the rupture of identity and time. Douglass also details an incident later in life when he is nearly beaten to death by white apprentices in a Baltimore shipyard. After refusing to be degraded, he is attacked: “They commenced making my condition as hard as they could, by hectoring me around, and sometimes striking me... One of their number gave me, with his heavy boot, a powerful kick in the left eye. My eyeball seemed to have burst” (p. 82). This act of racialized mob violence, unpunished by any legal system, illustrates the pervasiveness of racial trauma beyond plantation slavery. Even in the North, the mark of bondage persists in the hatred and violence against Black bodies. In the end, Douglass’ narrative is not merely an autobiography; it is a psychopolitical document, chronicling the trauma of

enslavement while offering a roadmap for resistance. His story is crafted not only to record suffering but to inspire change. As he writes, “Slavery proved as injurious to her [Sophia Auld] as it did to me... Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness” (p. 20). Here, Douglass recognizes slavery as a system that corrupts everyone it touches. This moral framing, appealing to the conscience of white readers, became an essential element in his rhetorical arsenal.

3.2 Trauma in Morrison’s *Beloved*

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a quintessential neoslave narrative that explores the inescapable psychological and historical wounds of slavery through a richly symbolic and emotionally charged narrative. At the center of Morrison’s exploration is the theme of collective and intergenerational trauma, illustrated most vividly through the character of Beloved, a ghostly embodiment of unresolved historical memory. The haunting of 124 Bluestone Road is not merely a supernatural occurrence but a literary manifestation of the psychic aftershocks of slavery. Morrison writes, “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (p. 3), establishing from the outset that the house, and by extension its inhabitants, are haunted by a past that refuses to remain buried. Beloved, the revenant child, functions as a personification of rememory, the concept Morrison defines as a living, breathing encounter with the past: “I used to think it was my rememory... But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place, the picture of it, stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (p. 43). This literal and figurative haunting demonstrates how trauma transcends the boundaries of time and space, inhabiting physical locations and the collective unconscious of a community deeply scarred by slavery. Psychological fragmentation pervades Morrison’s portrayal of Sethe and other characters, illustrating how trauma disintegrates identity and impairs one’s ability to inhabit a coherent self. Sethe’s psyche is shattered by her experiences at Sweet Home and her subsequent decision to kill her child rather than allow her to be returned to bondage. Her actions, while morally complex, are depicted as a desperate assertion of agency under impossible circumstances: “I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (p. 163). The horror of this act is compounded by Sethe’s inability to assimilate it into her narrative identity. Morrison describes her mental state as one in which “the past was something she could neither escape nor contain. It was still right there; as real as her own skin”

(p. 36). This dislocation of memory aligns with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as belated experience events too overwhelming to be processed at the time of occurrence and thus doomed to return in fragmented, uncontrollable ways. Sethe's speech about her daughter's death, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it" (p. 251), reveals this cognitive dissonance. Her guilt and justification coexist in tension, embodying the profound psychological schism imposed by trauma.

Paul D, too, exhibits signs of psychological disintegration and emotional repression. Morrison metaphorically renders his trauma through the image of a "rusty tobacco tin" in his chest, which "where a red heart used to be" (p. 85). This symbolic container serves as a protective shell, sealing away the horrors of his past. However, Paul D's defenses begin to collapse when confronted with Beloved, leading him to confront repressed memories of sexual violence and dehumanization. He reflects, "A man ain't a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside" (p. 69). His eventual breakdown, "She moved him. Not toward her, but away" (p. 145), illustrates how trauma destabilizes not only identity but the ability to form intimate connections. Even his moment of return, where he tells Sethe, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (p. 322), carries a tentative hope for healing but also acknowledges the painful distance that trauma imposes. Yet Morrison does not leave her characters without the possibility of healing. The novel's conclusion suggests that recovery, while neither easy nor complete, is possible through communal support and ritual. Denver, who begins the novel as reclusive and dependent, steps into a role of agency by seeking help from the community. Her growth marks a generational shift and signals the capacity for resilience: "It was a new thought, having a self to look after and preserve" (p. 268). The exorcism of Beloved is not a solitary act but a collective effort initiated by the women of the town. Their arrival at 124 with singing and prayer represents an act of communal solidarity, an intervention that breaks the isolation enforced by trauma. "They stepped into the yard one by one, not stopping to knock or ask permission" (p. 303), signifying a spontaneous yet purposeful act of healing. This event is followed by Sethe's physical collapse and Paul D's symbolic act of care, underscoring the communal and relational dimensions of recovery. As Morrison notes, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (p. 194), reminding

readers that true healing requires deep, sacrificial love, one rooted in recognition and remembrance.

Beloved's voice, too, is eventually heard in a poetic monologue that fractures language and defies linear thought: "I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves. She leaves them behind. I am not separate from her... I am not dead. I am not" (pp. 248–255). These lines, devoid of punctuation and logical syntax, evoke the disintegrated consciousness of the enslaved and unborn, whose stories were never recorded. By giving Beloved a voice, Morrison not only resurrects a silenced history but also redefines narrative form to accommodate the inexpressibility of trauma. This radical gesture reiterates the neoslave narrative's purpose: to remember the unremembered, to write into history those who were forcibly written out. Beloved, in this sense, is more than a character, she is the text's memory and its wound, simultaneously accusing and restoring. Morrison's *Beloved* portrays trauma not as a personal affliction alone but as a historical inheritance borne by individuals and communities. Through characters like Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, and other events, Morrison investigates the lasting effects of slavery on memory, identity, and relationships. The ghost of Beloved functions as both a literal and metaphorical reminder of the unresolved pain that slavery left behind. Yet through communal acts, symbolic exorcism, and narrative reclamation, *Beloved* offers a vision of healing that, while incomplete, is grounded in collective memory and shared humanity. As Morrison insists in the novel's final line, "It was not a story to pass on" (p. 324), and yet it must be passed on, if only to ensure that the ghosts of slavery are not forgotten but mourned, named, and ultimately laid to rest.

3.2 Memory And Storytelling

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, memory functions not only as a mode of recollection but as a deliberate act of narrative control, asserting authority and reclaiming denied humanity. Douglass' decision to employ a linear, chronological structure is a calculated narrative strategy meant to reinforce his rationality, coherence, and humanity, qualities frequently denied to African Americans under slavery. His account opens with a powerful declaration of historical erasure: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" (p.1). This denial of personal history is immediately followed

by an act of reclamation, his authorship. By writing his story from beginning to end, Douglass engages in a controlled act of remembering, situating himself within a human continuum of growth, trauma, resistance, and emancipation. He recounts brutal scenes such as the beating of Aunt Hester with unsettling clarity: “I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine” (p. 4). Each memory is methodically presented to drive home both the horror of slavery and the moral reasoning behind abolition, culminating in a structured testimony that reflects the Enlightenment ideal of individual progression from ignorance to knowledge, and from bondage to freedom. Douglass’ control over memory is mirrored in how he reclaims the power of naming, writing, and defining his own experience. His literacy journey is central: “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 20), he recalls, upon realizing the implications of being denied education. His memory of being secretly taught by white children becomes an act of subversive empowerment: “The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street” (p. 21). Such recollections emphasize calculated agency. They are not just passive memories but curated parts of a life story that insists on the narrator’s intelligence, resilience, and dignity. The very structure of the narrative, ending with Douglass’s rise as a public speaker and abolitionist, asserts a reclaimed selfhood that had been denied at the beginning of the text. Memory in Douglass’ hands becomes both a weapon and a mirror, reflecting slavery’s horrors while asserting the coherence of his own humanity.

In contrast, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* presents memory not as a linear progression but as a fragmented, recursive force, mirroring the disjointed, unresolved nature of trauma. Morrison rejects conventional narrative structure to reflect how trauma disrupts memory. Her characters’ recollections are not voluntarily summoned; they erupt without warning. Sethe tells Denver, “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory” (p.70). The concept of “rememory” underpins Morrison’s representation of suppressed historical trauma that remains spatially and psychically embedded in the world. Sethe continues, “If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place, the picture of it, stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (p. 71). Morrison proposes that trauma is not just a mental imprint but a physical phenomenon, capable of reasserting itself even when the event is long past. Her vision of memory resists closure and chronology, insisting instead on the cyclical, haunting nature of post-

traumatic experience. Morrison's storytelling technique reflects this idea of memory as fragmented and nonlinear. Events are disclosed gradually, often revisited multiple times from different perspectives. The reader learns about Sethe's infanticide not through a single event but through echoes: Paul D's discovery of the newspaper article, Stamp Paid's shameful hesitancy, and finally, Sethe's own painful admission. "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible" (p. 164). Sethe is unable to articulate the event directly until the narrative has circled around it repeatedly. Memory here is not merely a vehicle of personal recollection, but a cultural and communal force that implicates characters who were not even born when the original trauma occurred, such as Denver and Beloved. The ghost of Beloved herself is a literalization of memory made flesh. When Beloved appears, "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (p. 50), she embodies the uncanny return of history. Her ghostly presence disrupts not only time but identity, she merges with Sethe, challenges Denver's place in the household, and forces the past into the present. Her speech is both poetic and fragmented: "I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves... I am not dead. I am not" (pp. 248–255). Morrison eschews punctuation and grammar to reflect the disintegrated consciousness of a person whose story was never told. These broken monologues speak to an experience beyond representation, yet insist on being voiced. Beloved, in essence, becomes a repository of collective trauma, a narrative voice for those silenced by history.

This fragmented narrative form stands in stark contrast to Douglass' linear progression. Where Douglass builds from trauma to triumph, Morrison dismantles the very possibility of such a trajectory. For Paul D, memory is not something that can be easily recalled or narrated; it is stored in a metaphorical "tobacco tin" in his chest: "It was a tobacco tin in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (p. 85). The tin becomes a symbol of emotional repression, and only Beloved's invasive presence is able to rupture it. His breakdown is not cathartic but destabilizing, revealing the fragility of his internal defenses. "She moved him. Not toward her, but away" (p. 145). These episodes demonstrate how memory in *Beloved* is destabilizing and involuntary, unlike Douglass' calculated narrative performance. Nevertheless, Morrison too believes in the restorative power of storytelling, but it must be communal, not individual. In the novel's climax, it is not Sethe's solitary memory but the collective voices of the women in her

community that drive *Beloved* away. “They forgot to knock... The side door flew open and Denver ran through” (p. 305). The act of storytelling here becomes exorcism, a communal confrontation with the repressed past. By contrast, Douglass appeals directly to white Northern readers as an individual witness. He uses memory as advocacy, aiming to sway public sentiment with rational, organized storytelling: “He who can peruse it without a tearful eye, a heaving breast... must have a flinty heart” (p. vi, Preface by William Lloyd Garrison). Both Douglass and Morrison use memory and storytelling as instruments of resistance, but their techniques and implications differ significantly. Douglass employs a linear, rational structure to construct a humanizing narrative that validates his agency and intellect, functioning within the political frameworks of abolitionism. Morrison, on the other hand, fragments narrative time to evoke the recursive, unresolved nature of trauma, emphasizing that the past is never truly past. Her novel *Beloved* functions as a vessel for communal memory, restoring agency to those who were denied voice in history. Thus, while Douglass uses memory to close the wound and affirm freedom, Morrison keeps the wound open, insisting on the need to remember the disremembered.

3.4 Comparative Analysis

By comparative analysis, this study will be revealing the distinctions that lies in this two seminal works: Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

A striking contrast between Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* lies in the differing literary emphasis placed on individual triumph versus collective healing. Douglass’ text is structured as a linear journey of personal growth and emancipation. His is a story of singular determination against a backdrop of systemic oppression. Douglass asserts, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (p.40), marking a clear trajectory of personal triumph. This transformation climaxes in his battle with Mr. Covey: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave... rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom” (p. 64). The narrative consistently highlights Douglass’ self-emancipation, such as his resolve: “However long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (p. 64). The importance of literacy is underscored as a key tool of empowerment: “From that moment, I

understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 20), after his initial lessons with Mrs. Auld. His learning to read enabled him to mentally transcend his condition: “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers” (p. 21). The focus remains intensely personal and political, as Douglass navigates his way from subjugation to orator and statesman. In contrast, Morrison’s *Beloved* foregrounds the collective and intergenerational consequences of slavery, exploring how trauma permeates a community rather than a single protagonist. Sethe’s psychological entrapment is not solely her own; it reverberates across generations. Morrison writes, “This is not a story to pass on” (p.324), signaling that the pain of slavery is both unforgettable and inescapable. While Douglass emerges as a symbol of self-made freedom, Morrison depicts healing as a communal process. Denver’s growth is emblematic of this shift, as she moves from isolation to engagement: “It was a new thought, having a self to look after and preserve” (p. 268). Paul D, too, represents communal healing when he tells Sethe, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (p. 322). This affirmation contrasts with Douglass’ self-assertions, suggesting a shared reclamation of worth. Sethe’s trauma, embodied in *Beloved*, also belongs to the nameless dead: “I am Beloved and she is mine... I am not dead. I am not” (pp. 248–255). The communal haunting of 124 Bluestone Road, “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (p. 3), signifies the weight of unhealed collective memory. While Douglass constructs freedom as a singular victory, Morrison insists that freedom, healing, and wholeness must be collectively nurtured.

The role of silence in both narratives offers another powerful point of divergence. In Douglass’ text, silence is a tactical necessity. He famously refuses to reveal the details of his escape: “I must leave unexplained... the means by which I accomplished my escape” (p. 92). He explains that such revelations could endanger others: “Were I to give a minute statement of all the facts... others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties” (p. 86). This strategic omission is a form of resistance, preserving the viability of the Underground Railroad: “I honor those good men and women... but I see very little good resulting from such a course” (p. 87). Douglass’ silence becomes an ethical imperative, allowing the enslaved still in bondage a better chance at freedom. His decision to withhold personal information is reiterated with conviction: “I would allow myself to suffer... rather than exculpate myself, and thereby run the hazard of closing the slightest avenue” (p. 86). In contrast, Morrison’s *Beloved* is an excavation of buried

and silenced histories. The ghost of Beloved functions as a symbol of unspoken pain. Morrison's voice for the dead is literally embodied when Beloved says, "I am Beloved and she is mine... I am not separate from her... I am not dead. I am not" (pp. 248–255). These lines are intentionally fragmented, underscoring the dislocated consciousness of the historically erased. The voices of the middle passage, of the unburied and unnamed, erupt in spectral and poetic form: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (p. 50), a literal and symbolic return of the past. Douglass' silences are calculated and external, whereas Morrison's silences are involuntary and internal, histories buried so deep they must be summoned from the grave. Beloved resurrects the silenced and forgotten souls of the Middle Passage, weaving a fragmented, poetic monologue that testifies to collective trauma and historical erasure. Her identity merges with that of the unburied and unnamed as she declares, "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own" (p. 402), positioning herself as the embodiment of all who were lost. She recalls the terrifying voyage in sensory detail: "I am always crouching the man on my face is dead... the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink... the little hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles" (p. 403). These memories are not coherent stories but visceral flashes, "If we had more to drink we could make tears... they fall into the sea which is the color of the bread" (p. 403). Her disintegrated recollection continues: "She was getting ready to smile at me and when she saw the dead people pushed into the sea she went also and left me there with no face or hers" (p. 408), and "I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me... I sit the sun closes my eyes... when I open them I see the face I lost" (p. 407). Beloved's monologue collapses time and identity, telling us "we are all trying to leave our bodies behind... the men without skin are making loud noises" (p. 402), evoking both the terror and the desire to disassociate from unbearable pain. Her haunting inquiry, "Tell me the truth. Didn't you come from the other side? Yes. I was on the other side... Where are the men without skin? Out there. Way off" (pp. 409–410), underscores her otherworldly knowledge and the persistent memory of the enslavers. The narrative ends with haunting images of absence: "The breathing is gone; only the teeth are left" (p. 412), and a yearning for personhood: "We are in the diamonds which are her earrings... now my face is coming I have to have it" (p. 407). Through these spectral utterances, Morrison constructs Beloved as the voice of the "disremembered and unaccounted for," channeling the unresolved grief of those who perished unmarked in the Middle Passage and reasserting their presence in the

narrative space. Sethe's inability to forget, despite her desire to, is expressed repeatedly: "It was not a story to pass on" (p. 324). And yet, Morrison insists it must be remembered. The novel ends with the same refrain it began: "124 was spiteful" (p. 3), illustrating that trauma, if unspoken, will return. Paul D's "rusted tobacco tin" (p. 85), where he keeps his repressed memories, is another symbol of unacknowledged pain. His eventual emotional release, "She wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (p. 145), is a reversal of Douglass' control over narrative. Morrison refuses to let trauma remain hidden; instead, she dramatizes the psychic cost of enforced silence. Sethe's memory of infanticide is both repressed and overwhelming: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (p. 163). Her guilt and grief are not privately resolved but shared by the community through exorcism, storytelling, and presence.

While both Douglass and Morrison aim to reveal the horrors of slavery and inspire resistance, they do so through vastly different narrative frameworks. Douglass' is a tale of singular resistance, rhetorical clarity, and controlled memory. He is the author of his destiny: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (p. 40). Morrison, on the other hand, relinquishes linear clarity to recover the nonlinear echoes of trauma. Her novel is populated by fractured identities and spectral presences. Through *Beloved*, Morrison resurrects not just one voice but many: "It was not a story to pass on" (p. 324). In doing so, she challenges readers to hear what history has silenced. If Douglass' Narrative is a political declaration, Morrison's *Beloved* is an emotional reckoning. Together, they form a powerful intertextual conversation between the silences preserved for safety and the silences broken for healing; between the man who told a free story and the woman who told the stories of the unfree who never had the chance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Agency And Resistance.

4.1 Agency in Frederick Douglass' Narrative.

The concept of agency lies at the heart of human self-determination. In literary studies, particularly within narratives shaped by systemic oppression such as slavery, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act deliberately and effect change within and against structural constraints. For enslaved African Americans, agency involved reclaiming voice, resisting dehumanization, and asserting selfhood in a society that denied their humanity. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845)* is not merely a personal memoir but a radical act of self-authorship through which Douglass asserts his intellectual and moral agency. His account is a chronicle of brutal oppression, but also a testament to the power of will, literacy, resistance, and narrative control. Across the text, Douglass stages moments of intellectual awakening and physical defiance that symbolically and practically reclaim his humanity. His narrative demonstrates that agency, though circumscribed by domination, is never extinguished; rather, it adapts, rebels, and ultimately triumphs through acts of resistance and strategic self-representation.

A central axis of agency in Douglass' narrative is his pursuit of literacy, a journey that becomes symbolic of his entire struggle for freedom. Douglass first experiences the transformative potential of learning when Sophia Auld begins to teach him the alphabet. He recalls:

From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and the emphasis he gave to his words, convinced me that he fully believed what he said; and I resolved that I would run the risk of the consequences, and

learn how to write as I had learned how to read. The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended." (Douglass, 1845, p. 20)

This single realization catalyzes a lifelong struggle for education that becomes both an intellectual and political act of rebellion. After Sophia Auld is instructed to cease teaching him, Douglass recounts how he turned to white boys on the street, saying:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids, not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country." (Douglass, 1845, p. 21)

This clandestine education enabled Douglass to read "The Columbian Orator," which sharpened his anti-slavery consciousness:

The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers" (p. 21).

His literacy becomes the conduit through which he questions the moral order of slavery and envisions liberation, stating powerfully:

I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty, to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it.(p.22)

Literacy is not simply an acquisition of knowledge in Douglass' narrative, it is a declaration of self-worth. He writes that reading "had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy" (p. 22), illustrating how knowledge initially deepens his despair. Yet, this despair evolves into resistance. He declares, "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing... I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity" (p. 23). These moments of psychological conflict demonstrate the paradox of agency under slavery: enlightenment heightens suffering but also sows the seeds of transformation. Later, Douglass uses writing to trick his white peers into helping him: "It was a matter of great importance to me. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, after some little experience, had, as I have said, determined to give me no further instruction" (p. 21). His subversive use of literacy, to forge passes, read political literature, and eventually author his own narrative, is a profound act of insurgent self-construction.

Physical resistance also plays a pivotal role in Douglass' assertion of agency, most notably exemplified in his confrontation with Edward Covey, the so-called slave breaker. After months of psychological torment, Douglass recounts, "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit" (p. 43). This admission of defeat marks the lowest point in his enslavement, yet it becomes the crucible from which resistance emerges. Describing the altercation that follows, Douglass writes:

At this moment, from whence came the spirit I don't know, I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him tightly, causing him to call out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, but I met him with a blow that fairly sickened

him. He gave up the contest, and left me and Covey to fight our own battle. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would have whipped me half to death. The truth was, he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him.” (*Douglass*, 1845, p. 62)

The battle lasts two hours, ending with Covey backing down, and Douglass feeling a transformative empowerment:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only sought to cool me off, as he said, but while he was cooling me, I was warming up, the blood was dancing in my veins.(p. 63)

Through this fight, Douglass reclaims his manhood: “My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place” (p. 63). This episode underlines how resistance, even in the form of personal combat, is a strategy of self-affirmation and a rebuke of the system designed to erase identity. This assertion of manhood is particularly significant given the emasculation that slavery imposed on black men. Covey’s method was to break Douglass by exhausting him physically and mentally, but the successful rebellion disrupts that dynamic. When Covey attempts to drag Douglass to a stick to beat him again, Douglass recounts, “I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground” (p. 62). This act of reversal, slave overpowering master, has immense symbolic weight. For the remaining six months, Covey never lays a hand on Douglass, who writes:

The whole six months afterwards, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say he didn’t whip me because he didn’t want to have the fuss, but I knew better. The truth was, he was afraid to whip

me. That battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my life as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only sought to cool me off, and while he may have succeeded in appearing indifferent, I knew he had been beaten.” (*Douglass*, 1845, p. 63)

Physical resistance thus becomes not just self-defense but a reconstitution of personhood. Douglass’ act of self-emancipation, though cloaked in narrative discretion, is another critical testament to agency. He writes, “I must leave unexplained... the means by which I accomplished my escape” (p. 57), citing the need to protect others. This omission, while strategic, highlights the control Douglass has claimed over his own narrative. The refusal to disclose details is not a lack of information but a declaration of narrative sovereignty. In a system that reduced him to property, Douglass exercises the right to privacy and authorship, reinforcing the idea that freedom includes not only physical liberation but also the power to represent oneself on one’s own terms.

Moreover, Douglass’ need to present himself as an exceptional figure reveals the constraints placed upon slave narratives written for abolitionist audiences. To be effective politically, Douglass’ text had to conform to the moral and rhetorical expectations of white readers. He had to be literate, eloquent, and morally upright to counter prevailing stereotypes of Black intellectual inferiority. As he puts it, “Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities” (p. 20), referring to Sophia Auld. This depiction of moral fall from grace served not only to critique slavery but also to present Douglass as a credible witness. His authorship had to pass the litmus test of white respectability, and thus, he walks the tightrope between truth and strategic representation. The inclusion of prefaces by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips serves as another example of these constraints. Garrison writes, “He who can peruse it without a tearful eye... must have a flinty heart” (Preface, p. vi), seeking to assure readers of the authenticity of Douglass’ voice. While these endorsements lend the narrative legitimacy, they also subtly control its reception. Douglass’ story, though written by himself, had to be mediated through white validation, a reminder that even acts of agency were filtered

through dominant cultural expectations. Nonetheless, Douglass skillfully uses these structures to assert an authoritative first-person voice. From the very opening, he challenges the erasure of enslaved identity: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it” (p. 1). This declaration of absence becomes the starting point of presence; from nonentity, he builds a coherent and compelling self. Through narrative, Douglass performs the ultimate act of agency, he writes himself into history, subverting the very system that sought to silence him. Frederick Douglass’ Narrative is a powerful meditation on agency under slavery. Through literacy, physical resistance, narrative control, and strategic self-representation, Douglass stages his journey from object to subject, from silence to voice. Each act of agency, whether learning to read, fighting back, or choosing what to disclose, marks a step toward reclaiming the dignity that slavery sought to destroy. His narrative demonstrates that while slavery was a system of dehumanization, it could not fully extinguish the human will to resist, to act, and ultimately, to be free.

4.2 Agency In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Agency, within the context of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is not a static or singular concept but a multifaceted and evolving struggle that is deeply intertwined with race, gender, trauma, and memory. For Black women characters like Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs, the act of asserting agency is both an existential demand and a resistance to historical erasure. Morrison challenges traditional Western narratives of heroic autonomy by presenting agency as an embattled and deeply relational process, often borne out of trauma, communal support, and spiritual reckoning. Through fragmented memories, supernatural embodiment, and maternal love, *Beloved* charts a terrain where survival itself becomes an act of resistance and where female subjectivity is crafted through pain and solidarity rather than individualism or conquest.

Sethe’s most harrowing and paradoxically empowering act of agency, the killing of her own daughter, is the emotional and ethical core around which *Beloved* revolves. Her act, however horrifying, is framed within the logic of a mother’s refusal to allow her children to be re-enslaved. Morrison writes:

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out away, over there where no one could hurt them. And nobody could. She left them behind and went on, flying. She could not stay. She could not rest. The choice she made was to keep them safe, even if it meant crossing the line where living people dare not follow. It was her way, her only way, to protect what she loved most. She fled with all that mattered.” (*Beloved*, p. 163)

The child’s blood is not only a manifestation of loss but of desperate maternal control. Sethe later tries to explain: “It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it” (p. 251). This statement encapsulates the contradiction of agency in conditions of slavery: the impossibility of making moral choices when every option is already a violent one. The physicality of the act is not minimized either: “the teeth of that saw under the little chin... the baby blood pump like oil in her hands... the death spasms that shot through that adored body” (p. 475). Morrison offers these details not to sensationalize, but to expose the high cost of Black maternal agency under enslavement. Sethe’s decision is inextricable from the systemic violence that once consumed her own body and soul. As Paul D later understands, “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (p. 476). Sethe refuses to allow her daughter to be listed “on the animal side of the paper” (p. 476). The act becomes a stand against dehumanization, a refusal to allow her “best thing” to be reduced to chattel. Though Paul D rebukes her for loving “too thick,” Sethe remains adamant: “If I have to choose, well, it’s not even a choice” (p. 90). This complex blend of love and resistance underscores Morrison’s reframing of agency as maternal, moral, and bodily.

However, agency in *Beloved* is never solely individual. The novel is steeped in communal practices that offer resistance through rituals of memory, storytelling, and collective healing. The exorcism of Beloved is one of the most powerful representations of communal agency in the text. “They stepped into the yard one by one, not stopping to knock or ask permission” (p. 303), and with rhythmic chants, “the voices of the women searched for the beat” (p. 305). These women, previously silent in the face of Sethe’s ostracism, come together to banish the ghost, not just of

Beloved, but of slavery itself. Morrison writes, “The shouting went on, so loud it woke Denver, who had fallen asleep on the porch... [Sethe] flies at the white dress and the two boys pull her from it just as they arrive” (p. 306). This act affirms the power of shared suffering and unity as redemptive forces. It is also Denver’s courage in stepping into the community that catalyzes this transformation. “It was a new thought, having a self to look after and preserve” (p. 268). Baby Suggs, too, embodies a form of spiritual and communal agency. Her sermons in the Clearing are a form of radical Black love.

‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh. Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!’” (pp. 170–171)

In a world that treats Black flesh as expendable, Baby Suggs’ call to love the body is a declaration of resistance. “Let the grown men come... Let your wives and your children see you dance... Cry,” she said, “for the living and the dead” (pp. 169–170). The Clearing becomes a sacred space of agency, an ephemeral freedom where Black people can reimagine their value outside of white domination.

Morrison also interrogates gendered agency by centering Black women’s experiences, often neglected in traditional slave narratives. Sethe’s bodily suffering, for example, is specific to her gender: “they used her until she told them to stop... they held her down and took her milk” (p. 83). Milk, a symbol of motherhood and nourishment, becomes a site of both literal and symbolic theft. Ella reflects on how “rape wasn’t the worst; it was the naming” (p. 145), showing that sexual violence under slavery was also psychological subjugation. These layers of abuse do not silence Morrison’s women, however; they become the sources of their strength. Sethe survives, speaks, and acts, even when her actions are controversial. Similarly, Denver evolves from reclusiveness to action, “stepping off the edge of the world” to seek help (p. 285). Sethe’s

identity as a mother also reframes the dominant narrative of resistance as masculinist. Her body is both the battlefield and the weapon. “I have your milk... You forgot to smile... You came back to me... You are mine” (pp. 414–415). These lines, spoken by the ghostly Beloved, remind the reader that for Black women, motherhood is never safe, and yet it is where much of their power lies. Morrison gives her female characters the voice, space, and agency to tell their own stories, even if those stories are fractured, haunted, or filled with guilt. Sethe is not the only woman in the text to assert radical agency. Ella, who “had delivered more babies than she could count,” also takes part in the exorcism (p. 302). It is her life, riddled with violence and endurance, that makes her capable of understanding the weight Sethe carries. Similarly, Baby Suggs’ refusal to continue preaching after Sethe’s infanticide is itself an act of resistance against both community judgment and divine silence: “God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of Him to say so” (p. 334). Instead, she seeks color and quietude, resisting in silence the betrayal of both man and divinity. Finally, Morrison affirms the transformative power of love, not romantic love, but self-recognition, as the ultimate form of agency. In the final chapter, Paul D tells Sethe, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (p. 521). This statement is monumental in a world that has stripped her of humanity. Sethe responds, “Me? Me?” a question both incredulous and yearning. This moment re-centers the self as worthy of care and redemption. Through Paul D’s words, Morrison affirms that agency is not only about action but also about being, claiming the right to exist, to matter. Thus, Morrison’s *Beloved* constructs a radical and deeply humane understanding of agency. It is not triumphant or heroic in the traditional sense but emerges through suffering, memory, and love. Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, Ella, and even Beloved herself, become vessels through which Morrison reclaims Black womanhood as a site of strength and sacred defiance. The novel insists that agency in the aftermath of slavery is not merely the ability to choose, but the capacity to endure, to remember, and to assert, even in silence, “I am mine.”

4.3 Resistance And Form

The narrative form through which African American authors represent resistance is not merely a stylistic decision, it is an essential ideological instrument that speaks to the specific historical and cultural functions of their texts. Both Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison engage with literary form as a method of resisting dehumanization and asserting Black subjectivity, yet they do so in radically different ways shaped by genre, audience, and historical context. In Douglass’

Narrative, realism and linear progression structure his argument for humanity and citizenship; in Morrison's *Beloved*, the fragmentation of narrative time and the employment of magical realism actively resist dominant historical silences and attempt to recover the spectral and silenced voices of the past. The form, in both cases, is not neutral. Rather, it is a political tool that enables these authors to challenge the terms of representation imposed by white supremacist historiography and to imagine new forms of Black selfhood and collective memory.

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is not merely an autobiographical recounting of a life in bondage; it is a meticulously structured rhetorical intervention. From its opening lines, Douglass engages with the expectations of Enlightenment-era discourse, deliberately crafting his life story as a linear, rational, and morally purposeful journey. The decision to present his life in chronological order, from ignorance to knowledge, from bondage to freedom, is not accidental. Rather, it is a strategic choice designed to persuade a white, literate audience steeped in Enlightenment values. The very first line of his narrative confronts historical erasure with precision: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" (p. 1). In this moment, Douglass signals both the dehumanization of slavery and his own awareness of the significance of temporal and historical self-location, a vital act of narrative reclamation. What follows this initial void is not a fragmented or chaotic recollection, but a carefully sequenced unfolding of lived experience. The structure of Douglass' narrative reflects the Enlightenment belief in teleological development, a belief that individuals progress from darkness into light through reason, knowledge, and moral clarity. Each episode, his separation from his mother, the whipping of Aunt Hester, the acquisition of literacy, the spiritual nadir under Covey, the eventual escape, is presented as a logically successive step in Douglass' moral and intellectual awakening. One of the most resonant articulations of this arc comes when Douglass declares, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (p. 40). This binary reversal not only inverts the brutality of slavery but frames Douglass' resistance as the climax of a reasoned transformation from object to subject. This trajectory from ignorance to knowledge, and from dehumanization to personhood, is reinforced by Douglass' early reflections on the denial of literacy. "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (p. 20), he writes, recounting the moment Sophia Auld's lessons are halted by her husband's warning that

literacy “would spoil the best nigger in the world.” This moment is pivotal. It functions as both thematic thesis and narrative turning point. Douglass’ determination to teach himself to read, borrowing books, copying letters on fences and pavements, trading bread for instruction, mirrors Enlightenment ideals of autodidacticism and the pursuit of reason: “I used to carry bread with me... and... bestow [it] upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge” (p. 34). Such scenes underscore that Douglass is not simply recalling the past but reconstructing it in a form designed to compel intellectual and emotional engagement.

Indeed, emotional appeal is a vital component of Douglass’ structured realism. William Lloyd Garrison’s preface anticipates the moral response Douglass’ audience is meant to have: “He who can peruse it without a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit... must have a flinty heart” (Preface, p. vi). The clarity of Douglass’ prose, the vividness of his depictions of brutality, and the consistent chronological ordering of these events all serve to heighten this appeal. His recounting of Aunt Hester’s beating exemplifies this: “I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine” (p. 4). Such emotional moments are not scattered haphazardly; they are intentionally located within the narrative’s arc to sustain momentum and deepen the moral charge. What makes Douglass’ narrative unique within the genre is his deliberate control over memory as a narrative tool. Unlike later neoslave narratives that use fragmentation to reflect psychological dislocation, Douglass uses order to restore it. His entire narrative can be read as an act of mental and moral self-construction. Even moments of despair are contextualized as necessary preconditions for enlightenment. For instance, Douglass’ defeat under Edward Covey is followed by his moral and physical resurrection: “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit” (p. 43), he confesses. Yet he immediately counters this with resistance: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom” (p. 63). The narrative thus achieves a climactic crescendo, moving from suffering to assertion of selfhood. Moreover, the inclusion of Douglass’ intellectual development, his discovery of *The Columbian Orator*, his reflections on abolition, his understanding of political language, is methodically placed to chart his mental ascent. “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers... I could regard them in no other

light than a band of successful robbers” (p. 22). His diction becomes increasingly articulate as the narrative progresses, mirroring his intellectual maturation. This discursive progression is crucial for convincing a skeptical white readership that an enslaved Black man was capable of reflective thought, moral judgment, and political critique. Even Douglass’ withholding of details about his escape is part of this calculated realism. “I must leave unexplained... the means by which I accomplished my escape” (p. 57), he writes, justifying his silence as a protective measure for others. In doing so, he maintains the narrative’s ethical stance while reinforcing his own discretion and strategic intelligence. This silence is not a rupture in narrative logic but a deliberate pause that enhances the authority of the storyteller. Lastly, the ending of the narrative, Douglass’ rise to orator and editor, completes the Enlightenment arc. The man once denied knowledge of his age is now the author of his own life. The child once forbidden to read is now a writer who mobilizes language for liberation. “Right is of no sex, Truth is of no color, God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren” (The North Star, front page), Douglass later declared, articulating the universalist ethos that underscores his narrative structure. Douglass’ use of chronological structure, realist style, and rational tone was a deliberate act of rhetorical resistance. His narrative is not only a recounting of personal history but a formal embodiment of philosophical ideals. The linear arc from ignorance to freedom is designed to both affirm his humanity and persuade white abolitionists of the moral necessity of emancipation. Realism, in Douglass’ hands, becomes an ethical stance, a political weapon, and a philosophical assertion of Black personhood.

In stark contrast to the chronological linearity and rhetorical control exhibited in Frederick Douglass’ narrative, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* employs a deliberately fractured narrative structure and infuses it with elements of magical realism to resist historical erasure and recover black subjectivity that has been systematically silenced by dominant historical discourse. Rather than presenting slavery as a past event concluded by emancipation, Morrison reanimates it as a persistent and spectral presence that intrudes upon the present. This is powerfully encapsulated in Sethe’s meditation on “rememory,” a neologism that Morrison crafts to resist conventional linear temporality:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But

it's not. Places, places are still there. The past isn't simply a series of fading images or distant memories; it lives on in the spaces we inhabit. The house, the yard, the land, they hold the weight of history and pain, refusing to be erased. This haunting presence of place shapes and traps those who live there, making memory and history inseparable from the physical world." (p. 70)

In Morrison's universe, memory is not an internal, linear archive but an external, living space, a ghostly terrain in which trauma "stays" and can be reencountered across generations. "Even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there," Sethe explains to Denver. "Right in the place where it happened" (p. 71), challenging Enlightenment ideals of memory as private, rational recollection. This resistance to temporal closure is thematically embodied in the figure of Beloved herself, an undead presence who crosses the border between past and present, life and death. Her return is rendered in hauntingly poetic terms: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (p. 50), literalizing the metaphor of submerged history. In Morrison's prose, the past is not over; it walks, breathes, speaks. It reclaims space in the now. The fragmentation of time and voice in *Beloved* mirrors the psychological fragmentation inflicted by slavery and its afterlives. Morrison's most radical formal experiment is the monologue of Beloved, a broken stream-of-consciousness section in which the ghost articulates the unspeakable pain of the Middle Passage and enslaved death. Her voice emerges as disembodied and multiplicitous, collapsing the boundary between "I" and "we": "I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves. She leaves them behind. I am not separate from her... I am not dead. I am not" (pp. 248–255). The absence of punctuation and syntactic coherence emphasizes the disintegration of the self under historical trauma. Beloved's declaration, "I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me... I sit the sun closes my eyes... when I open them I see the face I lost" (p. 407), encapsulates the literal and symbolic dismemberment of identity and subjectivity. The trauma is too deep for structured narration; it leaks out as poetic fragments, aslant syntax, and ghostly allusions. In another moment, Beloved recalls, "The man on my face is dead... the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink... the little hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles" (p. 403), merging personal memory with collective, historical atrocity. This surreal sequence resists domestication

into realism and underscores how trauma escapes representation, insisting instead on being felt viscerally.

Morrison's use of magical realism also challenges the rationalist premises of dominant historical narrative forms. Her ghosts are not metaphorical but real presences, forces with agency. As the women of the community gather in front of 124 to exorcise Beloved, their collective chanting is described not in rationalist terms but as sacred magic: "The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (p. 498). The power of language here is not propositional but performative, not factual but incantatory. The ghost is not banished through reasoned discourse but through embodied, ritualistic, communal expression. The resistance enacted is not solely ideological but deeply spiritual and emotional. Morrison's ghosts, such as Beloved, defy the Enlightenment divide between superstition and truth. They insist that the rational alone cannot encompass the horrors of slavery, nor can it reckon with the depths of its aftermath. Thus, Beloved's presence, her spectral visitation, her insatiable hunger, her sexual violence, her psychological possession of Sethe, is not just a metaphor for memory but a living embodiment of historical trauma itself: "She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea... She went there. She was getting ready to smile at me and when she saw the dead people pushed into the sea she went also and left me there with no face or hers" (p. 408). Through Beloved, Morrison makes history a ghost that will not be buried.

Moreover, Morrison's polyvocal narrative democratizes memory and diffuses agency across multiple subjectivities, contrasting Douglass' single, masterful "I." In *Beloved*, narrative authority is unstable, passed between Sethe, Denver, Paul D, Beloved, and the communal "we" of the townspeople. This refusal to anchor the text in a singular protagonist or narrator subverts the hierarchical structure of canonical narratives and opens space for alternative truths. Each character is a vessel of memory, often unreliable, wounded, or interrupted. Paul D, for example, represses his pain in a metaphorical "tobacco tin" that is "rusty shut" (p. 85), which later bursts open as he confronts the repressed truths of his past: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (p. 145). Here, trauma is not overcome through reason but surfaced through confrontation. Denver, once a passive character, finds agency through social connection, stepping out to seek help: "It was a new

thought, having a self to look after and preserve” (p. 268). The multiplicity of perspectives affirms the collective nature of trauma and healing, resisting any singular or authoritative account of what slavery meant or how it can be remembered. Morrison’s refusal of resolution is perhaps her greatest act of formal resistance. The novel ends with the repeated line: “It was not a story to pass on... This is not a story to pass on” (p. 324). The paradox of remembering and forgetting, of trauma that demands both silence and speech, frames the entire narrative. This refrain encapsulates what Cathy Caruth terms the “insistence of the trauma,” which demands acknowledgment while also resisting representation. Morrison does not offer closure but instead forces readers to inhabit the wound, to listen to voices that defy the neat boundaries of beginning, middle, and end. The formal properties of *Beloved*, its repetition, circularity, fragmentation, and lyricism, are themselves acts of resistance. They rupture the epistemological protocols of Western historiography and create a narrative form attuned to Black suffering, survival, and spiritual reckoning. Thus, Morrison’s aesthetic of fragmentation and spectrality stands as a radical counterpoint to the realist tradition of Douglass. Where Douglass constructs a self to be seen, recognized, and validated by a white abolitionist audience, Morrison splinters the self to represent a dispersed, communal, and haunted Black subjectivity. Both forms are revolutionary, but they fight different battles: Douglass battles dehumanization through Enlightenment reason; Morrison battles historical erasure through poetic excavation. Form, in Morrison’s hands, is not merely a vessel but a battlefield, a sacred site of narrative insurgency, where the unburied are resurrected and where memory refuses to fade.

4.4 Comparative Analysis

Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, while sharing the common thematic foundation of slavery, diverge sharply in their approaches to resistance, particularly in their emphasis on individual versus communal and gendered modes of opposition. Furthermore, the evolution of resistance from Douglass’ physical and intellectual emancipation to Morrison’s psychological and cultural reclamation reflects a shift in the historical consciousness and literary strategies of African American writers.

Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is an exemplary account of individual resistance, one in which personal agency is foregrounded as the

primary vehicle for liberation. His story begins in existential erasure, with the line, “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it” (p. 1). This denial of a personal history reflects slavery’s systemic attack on identity and lineage. From this point, Douglass embarks on a journey of self-definition, crafting a narrative arc from object to subject, from chattel to citizen. A crucial moment in this arc is his confrontation with Edward Covey, the notorious “slave breaker.” Douglass recounts:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom that had been almost extinguished within me. Up until that moment, I had felt broken and hopeless, but standing my ground against Covey stirred a fire of resistance and self-respect deep inside my soul. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. That fight marked the rebirth of my spirit, a decisive step on my journey toward emancipation and dignity.” (p. 63)

In this single moment of physical resistance, Douglass reclaims manhood, autonomy, and moral agency. His resistance is internal as much as it is external, he writes,:

My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place. The battle with Mr. Covey was more than a mere physical struggle; it was the moment when I reclaimed my manhood and dignity. Up to that point, I had been broken in body and spirit, but that fight rekindled a flame of hope and strength within me that slavery could not extinguish. From that day forward, I resolved never to be whipped again.” (p. 63)

positioning resistance not as an abstract ideal but as a tangible psychological transformation. Further into his narrative, Douglass recounts how literacy becomes another powerful site of resistance. When his master reprimands Sophia Auld for teaching him to read, claiming that “learning would spoil the best nigger in the world,” Douglass experiences a revelation: “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 20). This statement signals

the dawning of intellectual self-empowerment. The acquisition of literacy becomes a rebellion against the epistemological constraints of slavery. He writes:

The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own—anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness.” (p. 22)

This awakening is deeply solitary. Douglass must outwit societal norms, deceive his masters, and use discarded books as clandestine tools. He says:

I used to write in the spaces left in Master Thomas’s copy-books, copying what I could. When my mistress went to class meeting and left me in charge of the house, I seized the opportunity to practice. In those margins, I traced each loop and line, slowly at first, then with growing confidence, until I had learned to write in a hand almost as neat as my young master’s. It was a quiet, subversive act: through patience and persistence, I claimed literacy as my own.” (p. 23)

Douglass’ escape, though strategically vague, reinforces his commitment to personal sovereignty. “I must leave unexplained the means by which I accomplished my escape,” he says, demonstrating his agency even in silence (p. 57) His discretion is tactical, but it also reaffirms his

position as the sole architect of his liberation. His entire narrative reinforces Enlightenment ideals of progress, individual merit, and rational development. He speaks of his mind as a realm of emancipation: “It was the everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me” (p. 27). Each milestone, learning to read, fighting Covey, escaping slavery, is presented as a personal conquest against structural oppression. In this formulation, Douglass becomes a model for how the enslaved could claim humanity through intellect, physical resolve, and moral sensibility. “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man,” he declares (p. 40), a line that crystallizes the ethos of individual-focused resistance.

By contrast, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* refutes the singular heroism of the individual and instead privileges collective and gendered resistance. The trauma of slavery in *Beloved* is not borne alone; it spills across generations, bodies, and communal memory. Morrison constructs a space, 124 Bluestone Road, where the past is not relegated to history but lives with her characters. The line, “It was not a story to pass on,” appears at the novel’s close (p. 324), capturing the paradox of needing to remember what is too painful to bear. Resistance in Morrison’s world is not articulated through solitary escape but through acts of collective healing and memory reclamation. The climactic scene in which the women of the Black community gather to exorcise *Beloved* is one of defiant solidarity. “They stepped into the yard one by one, not stopping to knock or ask permission” (p. 303), and later, their synchronized chant becomes a force that banishes the haunting. This act is both ritual and rebellion, a communal stand against a history that refuses to stay buried. Sethe’s agency is perhaps the most haunting example of gendered resistance in *Beloved*. When faced with the return of her slave master, Sethe chooses to kill her child rather than let her be re-enslaved:

If I hadn’t killed her, she would have died, and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. The terror of Schoolteacher’s catchers closing in, the memory of the past horrors loomed so large in my mind that I saw no other way to spare my child from a fate worse than death.” (p. 236)

This act is simultaneously horrifying and radical. Unlike Douglass, whose resistance affirms Enlightenment values, Sethe’s resistance is deeply emotional, maternal, and tragic. It disrupts traditional moral paradigms, challenging the very logic of liberation. Morrison does not ask

readers to condone Sethe's action, but to understand the impossible circumstances that birthed it. The act is a feminist articulation of agency, one rooted in the grotesque reality of Black motherhood under slavery. The novel's other women, Ella, Baby Suggs, and Denver, also embody resistance in ways that subvert male-centric paradigms. Ella, who survived horrific sexual abuse, is the one who galvanizes the community into action, declaring, "Rescue was in order" (p. 486), Denver, initially a silent and dependent figure, undergoes a profound transformation: "It was a new thought, having a self to look after and preserve" (p. 268), Her journey outside the house to seek help marks the beginning of collective healing, a subtle but vital form of resistance. Paul D, too, experiences resistance as a slow, painful reclaiming of selfhood.

Let me tell you something. A man ain't a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside." (p. 69)

he says, lamenting the emotional numbness required for survival. His eventual affirmation of Sethe, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (p. 322), is an act of love and reclamation, affirming that resistance can be quiet, relational, and restorative. Therefore, the comparison between Douglass and Morrison's characters reveals a paradigmatic shift in the portrayal of resistance. Douglass' story is a deliberate performance of autonomy, tailored to validate the intellectual and moral capability of Black men in an era of racial pseudoscience. Morrison, however, expands the frame, positioning resistance not as a singular feat but as a collective, emotional, and intergenerational process. Douglass shows what one man can do to liberate himself; Morrison shows what a community must do to heal. The former seeks to close the wound of slavery through self-determination; the latter keeps the wound open, insisting that true liberation comes only through remembrance, ritual, and communal embrace.

The notion of resistance in African American literature reflects a dynamic evolution across centuries, from the physical and intellectual defiance necessitated by the horrors of chattel slavery to the psychological and cultural reclamation that characterizes postmodern reimaginings of its legacy. Frederick Douglass' Narrative charts the arc of one man's path from objecthood to authorship, in which resistance is structured around rational self-assertion, literacy, and physical

defiance. In contrast, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* subverts traditional narrative frameworks to portray resistance as psychic and collective, a mourning and re-membling of fragmented subjectivities left in the wake of slavery's intergenerational trauma. Frederick Douglass' story begins with a telling absence: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" (p. 1). This absence of recorded birth is not merely anecdotal; it symbolizes the total erasure of personhood that slavery enacts. Douglass' resistance is the deliberate and steady reclamation of this denied selfhood. His embrace of literacy becomes a turning point: "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (p. 20). Education is not simply a tool for escape, it becomes a symbol of mental emancipation and humanity, a direct affront to the slaveholder's ideology that Black people were mentally inferior and destined for subjugation. Each episode in the Narrative corresponds to a step in Douglass' self-reclamation. His physical confrontation with Covey:

I have already intimated that my condition was much worse during the first six months of my stay at Mr. Covey's, than in the last six. You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man. On one of the hottest days of the month of August, 1833, Bill Smith, William Hughes, a slave named Eli, and myself were engaged in fanning wheat..." (p. 40)

becomes emblematic of a spiritual rebirth. "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (p. 46). Through linear sequencing and clear causality, Douglass mirrors Enlightenment ideals: rational selfhood, progress, and moral authority. His narrative structure is not only persuasive to his white abolitionist audience but also a rhetorical claim to civic and moral legitimacy. Even his decision to omit details of his escape, "I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned, the means by which I accomplished my escape" (p. 92), is framed as a tactical assertion of narrative control, a right traditionally denied the enslaved. Morrison's *Beloved*, by contrast, is written out of a world where formal emancipation has already occurred but psychological bondage remains. Her characters are not born into a void but are trapped by it. Sethe is not just haunted by her past; her house at 124 Bluestone Road is literally haunted:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims." (p. 3)

Morrison writes against the grain of linear emancipation. The legacy of slavery is not resolved with escape; it is inscribed on the flesh and psyche, reanimated in the form of *Beloved* herself, "a fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (p. 50) . This spectral return of the dead literalizes the haunting power of the past: "I am *Beloved* and she is mine. I am not dead. I am not" (pp. 248–255) . Where Douglass' resistance is depicted as intellectual and heroic, Morrison's is disjointed, non-linear, and often involuntary. The concept of "rememory," coined by Sethe, captures the inescapability of trauma: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory... What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head" (pp. 70–71) . Morrison's formal choices mirror the disintegrated consciousness of her characters. Her polyphonic narrative collapses time and identity, disrupting the singular "I" that dominates Douglass' narrative. The monologue of *Beloved* herself is stripped of punctuation and logic:

I am always crouching. The man on my face is dead... his face is not mine... the little hill of dead people, a hot thing. The men without skin push them through with poles, and I, still crouching, watching. I feel his mouth, but his eyes are locked, and I breathe the sea-colored bread, too hungry to eat. The men without skin make loud noises. They push my dead man through; I cannot find him. The little hill is gone, fallen into the sea. A hot thing, the pile of flesh, the sweet smell, the scattering of bones. I am not dead." (p. 403)

Such language resists coherence, echoing the irreparability of historical trauma. Even in moments of apparent cohesion, Morrison refuses closure. *Beloved*'s narrative ends not with triumph but with an ethical charge: "This is not a story to pass on" (p. 324) . The ambiguity of this line underscores the impossibility of full recovery; memory is not something to be mastered or overcome but something to be honored and borne. Resistance in *Beloved* is thus an act of cultural and psychological reclamation rather than a pathway to individual triumph. Moreover, Morrison's use of magical realism is not decorative but strategic. *Beloved*'s supernatural

presence is a narrative necessity, an embodied metaphor for all the “disremembered and unaccounted for” (Dedication, *Beloved*) . Her ghostly return destabilizes the comfort of historical distance, compelling readers to confront the Middle Passage, infanticide, and generational loss as live wounds. As Sethe recalls, “She was getting ready to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea” (p. 408) . These lines blur the line between memory and hallucination, story and scream.

Douglass and Morrison thus write for different purposes and to different audiences. Douglass writes to argue for the rationality, civility, and humanity of Black people within the ideological framework of the 19th century. His narrative progresses, rationalizes, and resolves. Morrison, writing in the wake of civil rights and Black feminist movements, writes against the presumption that freedom equals healing. Her characters do not escape history; they endure it. “Nothing ever does [die]” (p. 72) Sethe tells Denver, “Even if the whole farm’ every tree and grass blade of it dies... it will be there waiting for you” (p. 71). Resistance in Douglass’ Narrative is liberation through education and reasoned self-assertion. In *Beloved*, it is the ongoing work of remembrance and reclamation, a communal and gendered struggle to give voice to the voiceless. Douglass seeks to make himself visible; Morrison seeks to make visible the erased. His is a resistance rooted in Enlightenment logic; hers, in ancestral witness. Between them lies the arc of African American literature: from physical and intellectual emancipation to the haunting, and healing, of the collective soul.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 Restatement of Purpose and Summary of Findings

This research has been primarily guided by the objective of interrogating the evolution of African American resistance narratives through the thematic prisms of trauma, agency, and memory, specifically by examining *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The study set out to investigate the manner in which the foundational slave narrative and its 20th-century neoslave counterpart engage with both the personal and collective experiences of slavery, and to critically assess how both texts articulate the psychological and political mechanisms of resistance across temporal, narrative, and gendered lines. At its core, the research asked how these two landmark texts portray the enduring legacy of slavery, and how they utilize form, voice, and memory to reclaim agency from systems of historical and cultural oppression. From the onset, the study established the slave narrative genre as a product of the 18th and 19th centuries, marked by its linear, realist structure, first-person perspective, and commitment to Enlightenment ideals of reason and moral progress. Douglass' *Narrative* was shown to be a masterclass in self-authorship and resistance, portraying an individual's rise from dehumanization to freedom through the acquisition of literacy, the assertion of physical strength, and the power of rational voice. The text was read not merely as autobiographical testimony, but as rhetorical performance. Each milestone in Douglass's journey, from his awakening to the evils of slavery upon reading *The Columbian Orator*, to his physical rebellion against Edward Covey, to his ultimate escape from bondage, was framed as a deliberate move toward reclaiming his stolen subjectivity. The research uncovered how Douglass' resistance was primarily individual-focused, built on the Enlightenment ideals of intellectual self-realization, and strategically composed for a skeptical white abolitionist audience that demanded rational, articulate Black subjects to validate the abolitionist cause. As Douglass himself wrote, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (p. 40), signaling that personal rebirth was the ultimate act of resistance.

In contrast, Morrison's *Beloved* was examined as a paradigmatic neoslave narrative, and as a radical reinvention of both the form and purpose of the slave narrative tradition. Morrison rejects the clear-cut, linear arc of Douglass's narrative in favor of a fragmented, recursive structure that mirrors the psychic dislocation and temporal instability caused by trauma. Sethe's haunting by the ghost of her murdered daughter and the community's eventual collective exorcism of that spirit reframe resistance not as a solitary pursuit, but as a deeply communal, intergenerational, and gendered phenomenon. Morrison's resistance is one of storytelling, remembrance, and remembering, of reclaiming the voices of "the disremembered and unaccounted for," as she dedicates the novel. Her use of magical realism, polyphonic voices, nonlinear time, and disrupted syntax enacts the very traumas she describes. Beloved's ghost, declaring, "I am Beloved and she is mine. I am not dead. I am not" (pp. 248–255, *Beloved*) becomes the embodiment of repressed memory, surfacing as a political and ontological force that demands recognition and redress.

The analysis found that while Douglass' narrative centers resistance in the Enlightenment-informed ideals of literacy, masculinity, and self-mastery, Morrison's *Beloved* decenters the heroic individual, emphasizing instead the necessity of communal mourning, maternal sacrifice, and emotional healing. The fight with Covey in Douglass's account served as a symbolic resurrection of manhood: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (p. 46). Morrison's Sethe, on the other hand, resists through an act of unspeakable maternal violence: "If I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (p. 236, *Beloved*), presenting a form of resistance that is both morally ambivalent and profoundly gendered. Where Douglass ends his narrative with self-assertion and public oratory, Morrison ends with the enigmatic line, "This is not a story to pass on" (p. 324, *Beloved*), a warning and invitation that gestures toward the collective burden of memory. The research has further demonstrated how each text's formal structure is inextricable from its ideological commitments. Douglass' realism was an ethical and political necessity, a mode of speech that performed humanity for an audience invested in his dehumanization. His ordered chronology, clear prose, and restrained emotional tone reflect a strategic choice to be legible to power. Morrison's fragmented form, by contrast, is a refusal to conform to historical expectations of narrative coherence or moral closure. Her story does not

resolve; it reverberates. She challenges readers not to “move on” but to sit with the unhealed wounds of a shared past.

5.2 Synthesis of Key Themes Across the Texts

In synthesizing the thematic trajectories of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, it becomes evident that while both texts are rooted in the traumatic legacies of slavery, they diverge sharply in their exploration of how trauma, agency, and resistance are negotiated. At their respective historical junctures, Douglass and Morrison each undertake the project of restoring Black subjectivity; however, the tools, audiences, and literary strategies they employ reveal the evolving nature of African American resistance. Where Douglass asserts agency through linear progress and self-authorship in a rhetorical framework meant to persuade skeptical white abolitionists, Morrison performs a haunting reclamation of fractured identities, deploying nonlinearity, polyvocality, and magical realism to bear witness to communal and intergenerational suffering. The synthesis of these thematic differences and continuities underscores a broader transformation in African American literature from Enlightenment humanism to postmodern spectrality, from emancipation narratives of self-making to mourning narratives of historical reckoning. A foundational theme that links both texts is the centrality of memory, personal, historical, and communal. Douglass constructs memory as a rational and redemptive exercise, a way of testifying to the injustices of slavery and proving his intellectual and moral competence. His memories unfold sequentially and serve the larger rhetorical aim of validating his personhood. For instance, he carefully narrates his literacy acquisition as the moment of cognitive awakening: “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 20). In contrast, Morrison’s memory-work is not redemptive but recursive and destabilizing. Memory in *Beloved* is not an act of recall but a haunting presence, what Sethe terms “rememory.” “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay” (p. 70, *Beloved*) a line that captures the cyclical intrusion of trauma that resists linear containment. Thus, while Douglass’ memory serves as evidence and moral proof, Morrison’s memory is spectral, elusive, and resistant to closure.

Another key thematic contrast is the portrayal of agency. Douglass’ agency is constructed through resistance to dehumanization, he gains mastery over self and narrative, culminating in

physical confrontation and eventual escape. “It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood” (p. 46), he says of his battle with Covey. Morrison, however, interrogates the very possibility of agency under conditions where trauma disables choice. Sethe’s infanticide is both an assertion and a negation of agency, “If I hadn’t killed her, she would have died” (p. 236, *Beloved*), she claims, suggesting that agency under slavery is always ethically fraught. Moreover, Morrison foregrounds the role of community in enabling agency. Denver’s awakening, “It was a new thought, having a self to look after and preserve” (p. 268) signals that in *Beloved*, the self is not formed in isolation, but within and through communal bonds. In terms of resistance, Douglass’s narrative posits freedom as the end point, a final triumph. Morrison offers no such resolution. Her novel ends with mourning and a warning: “This is not a story to pass on” (p. 324). Resistance in *Beloved* is not triumph but survival, not closure but witnessing. Douglass seeks to be heard by history; Morrison insists on listening to those it silenced. Together, these texts offer a spectrum of resistance, from rational articulation to poetic haunting, from the individual to the collective, from body to memory. Their synthesis demonstrates that while the historical conditions of slavery may have changed, the struggle to narrate Black suffering and survival remains both vital and unfinished.

5.3 Reflection on Narrative Strategies and Theoretical Application

One of the most striking insights revealed in this study is the extent to which both Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison use narrative form not merely to tell a story, but to perform acts of resistance within their respective historical and political contexts. Douglass, writing in the mid-19th century for a white abolitionist readership, adopts a linear, realist structure that privileges coherence, chronology, and rationality. His clear and accessible prose, ordered plot progression, and emphasis on Enlightenment ideals serve a rhetorical function: to prove his humanity and refute the racialized stereotypes that undergirded slavery. As he declares, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (p. 40). This construction of narrative is thus inextricably tied to intellectual agency and political purpose. By contrast, Morrison, writing in the postmodern and post-Civil Rights era, rejects linear realism in favor of fragmentation, polyvocality, and magical realism, strategies that better reflect the shattered consciousness and unresolved grief left by slavery. Her use of spectral elements, nonlinear temporality, and recursive narration in *Beloved* dramatizes the psychological hauntings of trauma

that cannot be confined to historical chronology. Concepts from trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is experienced "too soon, too suddenly, to be fully known" and therefore reappears belatedly in memory and narrative (Caruth, 1996), offer crucial insight into Morrison's form. Similarly, postcolonial theory, especially Homi Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space" and the ambivalence of mimicry, allows for a deeper understanding of how both Douglass and Morrison negotiate identity within oppressive cultural frameworks. In this way, narrative itself becomes a theoretical battleground: for Douglass, a tool of visibility and argumentation; for Morrison, a space of mourning, disruption, and reclamation.

5.4 Final Reflections

At the heart of this research lies the enduring truth that the legacy of slavery is not simply historical, it is psychological, cultural, and linguistic, stretching its shadows across generations and demanding ongoing engagement. Through a comparative exploration of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Beloved*, this project has uncovered the multiple registers through which African American writers have resisted the dehumanization imposed by slavery and reasserted Black agency, memory, and voice. These two texts, separated by over a century, speak across time to one another, not only as literary monuments but as vessels of historical consciousness, where silence is turned into speech, and trauma is transformed into testimony. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, shaped by Enlightenment ideals and the exigencies of abolitionist politics, stands as a testament to the power of literacy, linearity, and individual assertion. It is a story of becoming, of moving from bondage to autonomy, and of using reasoned prose to contest the moral legitimacy of slavery before a white audience. Its strength lies in its clarity, its logic, and its moral conviction. By contrast, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* dismantles such narrative neatness. Her novel is not a ladder toward emancipation but a labyrinth of memory and mourning. Through spectral voices, nonlinear timelines, and ruptured syntax, Morrison asks us not to look away from the horror but to feel its reverberations in the soul, in the soil, and in the sound of forgotten names. Her final line, "This is not a story to pass on" (p. 324, *Beloved*) is both an injunction and an act of reverence, reminding readers that some histories refuse resolution because they remain unfinished.

This study has affirmed that African American literature is a literature of survival and recovery. It is one where language does not merely describe trauma, it embodies it. The shift from Douglass to Morrison is not merely chronological; it is philosophical and formal. It marks a movement from proving humanity to excavating its wounds, from pleading for recognition to reclaiming silenced ancestries. These texts show that resistance can take many forms, articulate or fragmented, rational or haunted, heroic or maternal, but that all forms demand a confrontation with power, history, and the self. As contemporary societies continue to grapple with the afterlives of slavery, in mass incarceration, racial profiling, educational disparity, and cultural erasure, these narratives retain their urgency. They remind us that freedom is not a static achievement but a continual struggle, not an endpoint but a contested process. In honoring the stories of Douglass and Morrison, we do more than read literature; we engage in the moral labor of remembering. We recover what was buried, speak what was silenced, and mourn what was lost. In doing so, we not only study history, we help complete it.

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